

*A Spoiled Heiress for the Kind-Hearted Bandit*  
**FELICITY WELLS**

# **A Spoiled Heiress For The Kind Hearted Bandit**

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A Clean Western Historical Romance Novel



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## **Copyright**

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**G**rey tried to ignore the wind that whipped past his face.

The horse was racing. It might have been going faster than he ever had before, and the feeling was pure exhilaration. His heart pounded.

He felt free — at least, until he remembered the serious matter they were handling at that moment.

His hat settled over his dirty blond hair. It was already sweaty and sticking to his skin as the band of thugs was pulling up ahead.

He wasn't sure his horse would be able to keep up. He hadn't exactly earned the first pick of steeds.

Grey knew he still had a lot of proving himself to do to get his old place back in the gang. He was too soft. That was what they had told him.

They didn't kick him out and he hadn't been killed. He was just... too soft.

The train they were chasing was speeding along the track even faster. It sent a shiver down his spine and he mumbled a quick prayer.

He hoped against hope there wouldn't be a soul other than the conductor on that train. He didn't want to be a part of more fear and violence.

He pushed faster. The horse wasn't going to do well if he had to keep pushing it.

He didn't particularly want another horse to die from the hard run. That wouldn't make his cohorts in the gang very happy.

Nobody around him was talking; everyone was focused on keeping up with the train. They just had to wait for the right moment to board, then move quickly to gather everything they could.

That was always the plan. Grey had taken some time to work his way up to boarding trains with Bart, and the ruffians had gotten very good at this job over the years.

They knew how to work as a team.

Grey must have been scowling because the leader seemed to notice him, slowing to keep pace with the train. Grey looked away, right into the window of the car next to him.

His heart stopped. He couldn't believe the rotten luck. A child smiled at him through the window. He had been spotted.

No one else seemed to notice him. He saw the boy's mother pull him off the window and back to what the family was doing. She didn't even look out the window.

Bart shouted.

Grey didn't register the leader of the gang shouting at first. He wasn't paying attention. His focus had been entirely on the family sitting there in front of him.

He was filled with dread as he turned to Bart.

"Move in!" The man was rushing everyone to get onto the train as fast as they could.



“There may be too many of them,” Grey shouted back.

His words were lost in the wind and he was quickly shoved towards the train by someone on his side. He hopped on, pulling himself up into the area where the cars were attached.

Grey’s breath was heavy. He hoped everyone inside would just cooperate. That would make this go so much easier.

If someone decided to pull a gun, he knew someone would die.

Another prayer to the heavens and he wondered if God was even listening to him.

He wasn’t sure he was worthy of being acknowledged. He hadn’t done much to gain the good graces of whatever higher power might be watching.

“Move it,” Bart grunted as they were ushered into the car. “We need to move, quick.”

Grey pulled out his weapon and the bag he kept tucked into his belt.

The people in the train car seemed to be terrified. One man tried to get up, but Bart shoved him back down, sending the man tumbling hard into his wife and family.

Children were crying, and the sounds of the screeching broke his heart. These people were frightened.

He knew he couldn’t focus on it, but it was all he could see and hear.

The gang was starting to move through the car, spreading out to collect bags and wallets and any jewelry they saw. The big pieces would be left behind.

Larger items were too hard to carry off the train — the smallest stuff was often the most valuable to a gang, easier to sell or trade to get the

things they needed or wanted.

Bart nudged Grey and called out, "Move it, lady."

The woman shivered in fear, trying to withdraw into her seat.

Grey felt another wave of guilt.

Bart was sneering as he turned back to another family and brandished his weapon, yelling for them to put all their valuables into the sack.

Grey remembered what he was supposed to be doing and waved his gun around once again. "Put that in here."

He indicated for a nearby woman to put her necklace into the bag, but he couldn't help but feel his heart break when he saw her hands shaking as she tried to remove it.

"I'm sorry." She fumbled with the clasp.

Grey moved up to help her, but before he could get there, Bart shot him a look.

The gang leader shifted his weight, leaned over, and ripped the jewelry off of the woman's neck. "We're not here to take care of you."

Grey winced at the sound of the sudden pressure as the necklace was yanked off. She wasn't going to die, but the chain had dug into her flesh and caused marks.

That was going to hurt her, but her fear of trains would probably last a lot longer.

Being robbed wasn't pleasant, and it usually left someone shaken for quite a while afterward. He wasn't supposed to concern himself with those thoughts; not anymore.

Bart had told him these people deserved everything that happened to

them. Those they chose as victims deserved to be robbed because they had abandoned people like Grey.

Grey wasn't sure he felt the same way. He remembered feeling the kind of fear the train passengers were feeling right now.

It had been a long time, but the feeling had stuck with him.

Bart nudged him again and he got back to work. If the robbery went smoothly, no one needed to get hurt. He had to keep things moving along. It was the best he could do.

It wasn't as if he had any other options. He had to finish this job.

He would have time to torment himself about the fear in the lady traveler's eyes later, when he didn't have to make sure that everything went smoothly. He could think of a dozen quips to shoot at Bart for his natural violence, but this wasn't the time for that.

It would only make things worse if he mouthed off to the boss.

There was always the risk of getting shot in this particular line of work, and it wasn't always from the people they were robbing.

His gang wasn't afraid to spill blood if it was needed. They had carefully cultivated the ability to be terrifying.

He shivered and went back to work, putting on his gruffest face. The faster he moved, the faster they would be off and away from the train.

He could hear Bart demanding for wallets and purses to be tossed into the bag. Grey followed suit.

He knew how to fake being violent and cruel, so that was what he did, putting on his most dangerous face before moving on through all the cars until they reached the back of the train.

Each car tightened the knot in the pit of his stomach. There were so

many ways that this whole operation could fail.

He drew in a deep breath — and then he saw the child. It was the same boy he had seen through the window of the train.

He was at the very back of the caboose, sobbing. He must have run when he realized there was trouble, but that boy looked terrified.

It brought back a rush of painful memories that he didn't want to face.

Bart shoved him out of the way. "Get moving."

"Right, I'm coming." But Grey had slowed down to stare at the boy.

He watched in terror as Bart barged past the boy to rush off the back of the train and land in a roll on the ground.

Thrown off balance, the child leaned hard against the railing.

Grey knew what was going to happen before it played out before him.

More men rushed past the boy, pushing him further and further against the railing.

He started to tumble over it, heading toward the ground. Grey knew the boy wasn't going to land right. He burst into action as the last of the men jumped from the train.

He didn't care what they thought.

Bart was screaming at him from the ground. "Leave him. Let's go!"

Grey ignored the words and pulled the boy up from the railing. "It's okay. You're going to be fine." He was trying to be soothing, but his voice was rushed.

He was far more than upset by the turn this day had taken.

Bart yelled something again, but Grey didn't even make an effort to pay attention to him this time. It didn't matter what the gang leader had to say.

The boy was shaking as Grey got him back up on the train platform.

Grey's heart was racing as he dusted the child off. "Are you alright?"

The kid shrunk away from him, looking terrified.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Grey tried to comfort the boy. He knew it wasn't much help, but he had to make an effort. "I just want to make sure you're safe."

"Can I go now?" The boy was crying.

Grey recognized the look on the boy's face. He stepped back to let the child slip away from him safely.

There was no way he would ever do anything to hurt the child, but he was a train robber — men like him didn't exactly have a reputation for kindness or mercy.

The boy slunk back to the train, throwing open the door and running into the car. The screaming started as soon as the boy got through the portal. He was calling for help.

Grey knew he had to get out of there, immediately. It was time to move quickly.

It took a moment for him to prepare for the impact, standing at the edge of the platform and facing the open plains to the rear and a little to the left of the train.

The worst thing he could do would be to land on the tracks.

He leaped from the back of the train and landed in a roll. It was never comfortable to go from standing still to moving so quickly, but he had

done this a few times before.

The rest of the gang was long gone. He stood there, staring.

There was a part of him that didn't want to go back to Bart, but he didn't have any place else to go.

He sighed, hearing the sound of hooves hitting the hard dirt of the Wyoming plains. His horse was coming up to meet him. They always did meet up after a job.

The gang's horses were well-trained like that. He didn't know how the team managed to be so good at training the animals, but clearly, someone had the touch.

The steed galloped up to him, and he reached out and put his hand on her face. "Hey, girl."

She whinnied back.

"Yeah, I know. We need to get moving. Bart is going to be mad enough. If I'm any later, he's likely to draw iron on me."

In a moment, he had mounted up. The train chugged on. They generally didn't stop for little things like robberies, so he had plenty of time to get away.

Grey and his horse rode off into the sunset. He doubted his course of action and pondered riding off never to be seen again, but he knew that was a terrible idea.

Bart would hunt him down for stealing from him, that much was certain.

Grey had some of the loot in his bag and one of the gang's horses. The gang wasn't forgiving of thieves, however ironic that fact was.

Riding off into the sunset wasn't easy. He knew he was heading into some stern reprimands. He had stopped to save one of the gang's victims and that wasn't acceptable.

Gentlemen bandits got caught. That was what Bart had taught him. They all had to be tough. No one would take care of them if they didn't take care of themselves.

He had learned the rugged nature of Wyoming the hard way as a young child, but he'd never unlearned the ability to be kind to people who hadn't done him any harm.

He wasn't supposed to have mercy. All of his care for human life should have been gone a long time ago. But he couldn't beat it. It just didn't seem to work that way.

Bart believed someone just having or owning something was a personal insult to him. Everyone in the gang had grown up painfully poor.

Everyone had come from difficult circumstances.

And Grey had fought hard to become heartless. He just couldn't do it.

Bart had left that boy on the back of the train and hadn't cared about what happened to him. And Grey knew he was expected to do the same.

He wasn't perfect at this job, but it was the job he had fallen into.

He knew how to get back to the hideout. That was easy enough, but the small farmhouse was still two hours away.

He could meet up with the gang there if he wanted to go home to them.

He stopped the horse and considered exactly what he was going to do. He had a long conversation with himself, letting the possibilities flow through his head.

There was a deep frown on his face, the worry creasing across his eyes.

He could just ride away. He didn't have to go back. No one would make him.

Grey wondered if it would even be possible to just disappear into the plains and build a small hut a few days' ride in a different direction.

Maybe he could even go to a faraway town and settle into the obscurity of the sheer number of people. It would have to be a big city, though.

Bart's gang had a wide range of territory and they constantly terrorized the people around these parts.

No, he knew he couldn't do that. He wouldn't even know how to start running away from the life of a bandit. Bart could probably find him anywhere he tried to run to.

Unless he went far East or out to California. He wasn't sure how he would even get to those places.

He bit his lip and spurred his horse on. He had to get moving or Bart would be even more upset with him.



Late looked guilty, and they would be worried that he was captured and turned by some lawman or another.

He rode into the small broken-down farm that they had made their home.

The ranch had been long abandoned before they found it, and if anyone attempted to claim it, they were shot at until they left.

So far, no one had been killed for the land, but Grey wasn't sure how long that would last.

Grey hoped he could just get his horse settled for the night and then move on to his bedroll and tent without anyone noticing.

He wasn't that lucky. He was never that lucky. Bart stomped up to him as he was brushing down his horse. "What were you thinking?"

Grey jumped, spinning around quickly. He was a little worried that he would be shot if he didn't react fast enough. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry almost got us caught. You should have left the boy."

Grey gulped hard. He wanted to say something, but he couldn't find the right words. "He would have died."

"What does that matter? Who the hell cares?"

Grey felt another rush of guilt. He wasn't a good bandit, but he knew his survival counted on being a member of the bunch.

He had just put all of it at risk to help someone outside of it. One of their victims, even. It was a bad move to try to help someone outside of their gang. Grey knew that.

"I didn't want some kid to die because of us." Grey threw up his hands.

“That kid and his parents would let *you* die,” Bart spat back at him.

“That doesn’t mean I have to be like that.”

Bart snorted. “You’ve lost your ever-loving mind. You should have just left the kid. You could have gotten caught or killed.”

Grey was reminded why he stayed there. Bart did seem to care about his men, even if he didn’t always show it. It was what made Bart take in kids like Grey had been.

“What does that matter?”

“It matters.” Bart’s hands were on his hips. The older man wasn’t going to give in. “People like them abandoned you when your parents died.

“The only ones that took you in was this gang. We took you in and even taught you a trade.”

Grey snorted. “A trade?”

“This is a trade. You make a living working this job.”

“It’s not just a job.”

Bart seemed to just grow angrier as Grey talked back to him.

Grey felt Bart roughly grab his arms and start to drag him out from under the lean-to that the horses rested under when they were at camp.

Grey didn’t have much of a choice but to follow the man. He knew he had messed up this time. Talking back to Bart was dangerous in the best of circumstances.

The rest of the gang watched him get dragged off. A few had the sheen of pity in their eyes, but most seemed amused that someone else

was in trouble instead of them.

Grey was kind of used to being in trouble by this point. It wasn't the first time being a good person had gotten him into extra travails in this line of work.

He sighed heavily and looked over at the crowd.

Bart hissed his displeasure. This wasn't going to end well.

Grey had some fears for his life. He had seen Bart shoot members of their gang in the head before for lesser offenses.

But Grey had come into this gang as a child. He still remembered how terrified he had been, all alone without a home or family that cared about him.

Bart had been kind then, offering to take Grey in and teach him a trade. He'd had no idea at the time what that 'trade' would be.

He wouldn't be able to start a new life, not after all of this. He had been in the gang nearly fifteen years. There was no turning back.

His heart started to pound. He could hear his pulse. That wasn't a good sign.

Bart was still hissing with rage. Grey couldn't help but notice how much the man sounded like a tea kettle.

It was almost enough to make him burst out laughing. Grey managed to stop himself because of how serious the situation was.

Bart didn't stop that odd, angry sound until they had secreted themselves a bit away from the rest of the others.

The supposed privacy didn't exist. Grey knew the men would be just out of sight, hiding around corners and behind bushes to listen in to whatever was said.

Someone might get shot, so it would be considered important enough to spy on.

Grey sighed. "I'm sorry."

Bart sneered at him. The hissing finally stopped. "Don't think saying sorry is going to fix this."

"I don't know what to tell you. Killing a kid would upset people. I was trying to make sure we didn't get as much heat on us."

"That kid saw you up close." Bart sneered. "You should have just let him die."

"I'm not just going to let a kid die." Grey shook his head. He was standing his ground. This would probably prove to be a mistake, but Grey didn't care.

He wanted to make it clear where he stood.

Bart hissed again. Things were starting to feel uncomfortable.

Grey fought the urge to ask if the tea was done.

Bart finally gathered himself long enough to speak. "You need to watch your damn mouth." The gang leader reached out and hit Grey in the face.

Grey stumbled back. He had been hit before; Bart wasn't a man known for his understanding nature.

Bart let out one more of those irritating hisses before his voice rose to a shout. "None of them deserved to live. We should have shot every single one of them."

"Right. Sorry." Grey was cowed. He hated the way Bart could bring him to this position, sniveling in the dirt out of pure fear.

“I want to make it very clear. The gang comes first. You aren’t going to be saving anyone anymore.”

Grey wasn’t sure he would be able to do that, but the last thing he wanted was to be shot after all of this.

Bart was yelling louder now. “Look at me, you useless sack of horse pucky.”

Rubbing his face, Grey turned to the abusive gang leader. That was going to hurt for a long time.

“I should just make you walk off into the desert with nothing.” Bart was still screaming. “Turn you out.”

“Fine. I’ll go.” Grey straightened up.

“I’m not turning you out, not yet. But if you keep up with the kind of nonsense you did today, I won’t think twice.”

Grey shrunk into himself again. He wasn’t being forced to leave. This was better than anything he might have imagined.

“You’re not getting a share, though.” Bart was still scowling.

The man was angrier than Grey had ever seen him. It was an ugly look, very easy to spot on the older gang leader.

Grey decided to slink back and just nod mutely. Saying anything at all would only get him in more trouble.

Bart rushed off, leaving Grey alone to ponder what he was going to do from there.

By the time Grey came back into the main camp, the other bandits were happily counting out and splitting their loot. Grey didn’t want to see it.

He simply walked to his tent and sat just inside the entrance. He closed his eyes and listened to the others talk.

They were happy with everything they had gotten, and a few of the men walking past his tent tossed him a few bills. It was secretive, Bart would be beyond angry if someone gave Grey anything from that job.

Grey knew he was to be punished for believing anyone outside the gang was deserving of anything resembling kindness. To Bart, outsiders were nothing but marks.

While Grey had tried to believe the same, he just couldn't do it. The gang never went out of their way to hurt anyone, but they never thought it was wrong to let someone get hurt if they got in the way or to shoot someone who tried to resist the robbing.

Grey rubbed his face. There were worse gangs that he could be a part of, but he wasn't sure he wanted to be a member of any gang.

He leaned out of the tent and stared off into the night.

This gang wasn't made up of bad people. They had been hit hard by the difficulties of life and had had to survive any way they could.

Many of them were bitter that they had no other options, and they had let that anger turn them into monsters.

Grey understood it. He really did. He just didn't feel like this was the kind of life he'd ever been meant to have.

It just felt so strange, like he was living in some sort of fiction, a strange dysphoria.

He slipped the cash into his wallet and then shoved the bundle into his pocket. He always kept his money on him. He lived with thieves, after all.

Sleep would not come easy to him that night. He was a man stuck

where he didn't belong. His kindness and the men that had become his family didn't seem to get along.

Thieves could not be kind men, Bart was frequently reminding him. They had to be vicious and cruel or no one would ever respect them.

But maybe Grey didn't care about respect.

**A**va's legs kicked up in the air behind her as she stretched out on her stomach in the grass. The movement made her skirts flutter behind her, but she didn't care about that.

There wasn't anyone to see her there. She loved privacy, hidden away in a little corner of the garden that almost no one came to.

It had been her secret spot since she was a child. Now that she no longer had nannies tracking her location, it had become a sort of shrine to her love of nature, far enough away from the main house that the gardener rarely worked this part of the land.

It gave it a slightly overgrown appeal, like she was in a lovely forest clearing.

A tree stretched out above her, thick branches and leaves rustling slightly in the breeze as she read her book. She didn't pay much attention to it.

It was a part of the ambiance now, as music for her to read to.

The tree was a great old oak, grown over many years. It was said her grandfather had been the one to plant this tree, but no one knew for certain just how old it happened to be. She used to hug that tree when she was very young but didn't do it so much anymore.

Nobody would come looking for her here. And she was certain she was missing no plans she had made in the past.



This was an afternoon that she could take just for her, a time to enjoy the moment and feel the bright sun on her back as she laid on the cool ground. It was nice, peaceful.

She was studying; it had taken her some time to get a hold of this book and she didn't intend to put it down until she finished every single page.

But her peace was about to be interrupted. A servant slipped into the small clearing in the garden that Ava was parked in.

Moments later, the yelling started.

Ava groaned and rolled over to get up. "What is it?"

The servant paused at the edge of the clearing Ava had been enjoying. "We're looking for you, Miss."

Ava was starting to feel frustrated. It was like she always had to ask for specific answers from the servants. They were polite to a painful degree.

"Yes, what am I needed for?" She tried not to let her irritation show in her voice.

The servant rushed over to her. "You're needed inside, Miss."

"Why?" Ava felt a little bit of sass enter her words. She didn't want to follow orders. She had never been the type to just do whatever her father wanted of her.

"Your father wants to see you."

Ava let out an overdramatic groan and wilted slightly. "What for?"

"There's a meeting he wants you to attend."

Ava didn't say anything else to the servant that had been sent to fetch

her. Instead, she headed right back toward the house, stomping as she brushed the grass and dirt off her dress.

She didn't want to attend this meeting, but the servant wouldn't be able to help her. She would have to take the debate right to her father.

He would be the only one who could release her from the obligation that she had been given no choice in.

She knew why he was sending for her. Whoever he was meeting for business had a son about her age, and her father was hoping to set her up with this young man.

She knew she would hate this man; it didn't matter who it was or what he did.

She had plans beyond getting married and just sitting at home while her husband cared for her financially.

Ava wanted to get an education and learn things, but constantly being introduced to new suitors got in the way of that. She ran her hands over her auburn hair, mussing the neat bun that it had been in.

Her father was in his study, where he maintained and worked to grow the fortune his family had amassed over the years.

She huffed as she opened the door to the elegantly appointed room. Bookshelves reached to the roof on every available wall.

The desk was a symbol of power and the intricately carved hardwood just reinforced the idea. It was a place that she'd loved as a child.

She used to curl up on the velvet-covered chairs with a book while her father worked there. She would share her love of learning with him, and he would listen intently.

But all that changed as she grew older.

Now, she was expected to become a young lady and do the sorts of things that young ladies did. She was expected to be courted and appreciated.

She didn't love that so much. She loved the words in the books. She loved the flowers. She loved the freedom she would lose if she ever married.

Her father looked up at her as she walked into the room and he fixed her with a wide smile. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. What's this about?" She didn't want to clutter the conversation with a ton of small talk. She had far more important things to do.

"Don't be rude. What were you doing?"

"I was reading this book." She held up the botany text. "It's got a lot of great information in it. I was hoping that we could talk about it.

"It talks a lot about the stamen and pistils of flowers. I find it fascinating." It was so easy to get her talking about the books that she had been reading.

Her father waved her off. An idle flick of his wrist told her that nothing she said mattered at that moment.

Nothing she had learned seemed to make him understand just how much she adored the books and education that she had the opportunity to pursue.

She spoke again, hoping to make her desires clear. "I was thinking that I might try to go to college."

"Why would you do that? There are plenty of nice men in the area for you to marry."

Those words broke her heart in two. She hated that she was just

supposed to stop learning because she had become an adult. This would never have happened to a son.

She sighed. “What did you want me here for?”

“I want you to sit in on this meeting with me. My partner is bringing his son with him again.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to sit in on the meeting.”

“I didn’t ask what you wanted. I said what I wanted.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” She was gobsmacked by how rude her father was to her.

He must be getting tired of her resistance to be married, she suspected. It was the only reason that she could think of. She rocked back on her heels, wondering what to say.

Nothing seemed like the right thing to say, so she just let the room descend into silence.

Her father took her silence as acquiescence. “Good. It’s time for you to get your nose out of those books and start learning how to host.”

“I’m not going to host your meeting.” She shook her head. “I’m going to go and study.”

“It’s nonsense. You’ve got a good life. We can find you a good husband and you’ll never have to worry about another thing for the rest of your life.”

Her father didn’t even bother to meet her eyes. He had gone back to looking over the paperwork on his desk.

Everything about him was so painfully dismissive. It broke her heart.

She had to say something. She tried to control her rage and not raise

her voice at her father. Nothing good would happen if she did that.

He would just shout her down and make her do what he wanted her to do.

She drew in a breath. It was a moment that she needed to steady herself.

She had time to figure out just what she wanted to say. Her father's head was still turned to the papers on his desk.

When Ava spoke, there was power in her words. She wanted to be forceful without being angry.

"I want to learn about botany, not how to host dinner parties. That's nonsense. I can do wonderful things if I'm just given a chance."

"You can study flowers once you're married." He waved her concerns off. Another flick of his wrist. It just infuriated her.

She had to remind herself not to lose her patience with her father.

"That's not the same thing." Her voice squeaked. "It's not just flowers. I want to learn how to make perfumes."

"You can't learn to make perfumes. Who would ever hire you?" Her father scoffed at her dreams. "Nice young women don't have jobs.

"They're wives and they plan dinner parties."

She stuck out her chin, trying to appear more confident than she felt. It was never easy to stand up to her father, but she had been doing it more and more.

Projecting confidence in her words was now a habit whenever she was being defiant. But there was still a rather large part of her that worried she would lose her father's love from standing up to him like she was.

“Maybe I want to be something more.”

Her father shook his head. “There’s nothing better for you. I’m trying to find you a good life where you never have to worry about anything ever again.”

Her heart shattered into a thousand pieces. She had been driven off, her dreams discounted. She had to find something to say.

She was half-infuriated and half-depressed. It was like her mind couldn’t make itself up on how she felt about all of this.

Her father had stopped talking.

She hissed as she drew in a heavy breath. “It’s not like that, Papa.

“I don’t want to go and get married to some man and live that kind of life. I want to study botany and make perfumes.”

Her father snorted. It took her by complete surprise. He was treating this like it was a joke.

She couldn’t believe that he would find this amusing. She was upset and wanted him to understand that. But he was nearly laughing.

Why would this be funny to him? She couldn’t understand it at all.

Her hands went to her hips. She accidentally jammed the corner of the book into her flesh but paid it no mind.

There were far more important things to deal with, especially after all of that.

She started to scream at him, her hands clenched into fists. She didn’t remember the words she used but was confident it would be impossible for him to ignore her now.

Her rage must have caught her father off-guard. He looked up and

blinked at her.

She finished her tirade and turned on her heel, storming out of the room without giving her father a chance to respond.

She was bursting with pride. Her father wasn't known for giving a lot of chances.

Ava knew her father wanted the best for her, but his definition of the best wasn't the same as hers. She wanted something more than what she had.

Her father must have followed her. She could hear him bellowing her name.

She turned back around. "I don't want to hear it."

"You won't be able to have the life you want. I'm trying to do what's best for you. You're young still, I know that.

"It's hard for you to understand how important something like this is. But I assure you that it's all going to be worth it. It's my job to make sure you're taken care of."

"I don't want to understand what you're saying. I want something different." She stomped her foot then immediately regretted the childish move.

"And I don't want to hear anything about dinner parties."

"Think of the ways you could use flowers to decorate," her father wheedled, still trying to reason with her.

She growled in frustration, turning to storm off once again. She wasn't going to stay in this conversation.

Her father let loose an exasperated sigh. She knew he was throwing up his hands. He had been doing that a lot lately with her.

She had been refusing any suitor that came her way, not even meeting them if she had the opportunity to escape the meetings. Her father was infuriating.

She flounced up the stairs and to her room. She wasn't going to go back down to the meeting.

It was impossible to get through to him, but he wouldn't make her come down if she kept refusing. He might yell at her afterward, but she would deal with that if and when it happened.

She flopped down on her bed with her book. She just couldn't enjoy the grass and sunshine after the argument with her father.

She looked out the window. A few drops scattered across the glass. It hadn't looked like rain when she was outside.

She must have missed it.

She turned to her book, cracking open the pages and inhaling the scent of the paper. It was a magical thing, a treasure trove of knowledge that she didn't think she could ever live without.

The book spoke of a world she desperately wanted to be a part of. It spoke of plants and perfumes and scents and other magical things that she knew science and art could make come together into something new.

It was heaven in a way she would never be able to accomplish.

Unless she broke all the rules and took a big risk.

It was tempting.



**G**rey couldn't sleep.

The night was long and dark, stretching on into what felt like eternity. He tossed and turned in his tent before he gave up on even trying to rest anymore.

The entire camp was quiet. He wasn't surprised. The men had been drinking.

They normally drank to the point of passing out after every successful job. It was one of the perks of their life. No one expected temperance from them.

It was the job that turned Grey's stomach.

He got up, feeling the strange nausea that came from having to do things that made him increasingly uncomfortable.

He loved these men, they were his family. But he knew what they were doing was wrong and could end up with them either dead or in jail.

They had seen several of their brothers hauled off by the law for being too slow and walking into a trap. He had been lucky to never end up there, but he sometimes felt it was only a matter of time.

The porch was empty. Normally, the seats were always taken by one of his compatriots, usually Bart's top men that he happened to be

honoring that day.

There wasn't much to that honor, but everyone seemed to want to compete for it. Grey had held that place only once before.

It was when he was young and had managed to wrangle up the horses after they had been let loose by one of the drunk thieves. They had never found who did it, but Grey had managed to track down every single one.

Now they were free for anyone to sit in because there was no one awake.

He took the opportunity to sit and stare out of the porch and enjoy the night sky.

He didn't have much time for his thoughts, though. The door to the big house opened behind him.

Grey didn't bother to turn around. It didn't matter who was there. But he knew someone would notice him. It might have been the reason they came out.

The only people that slept in the house were the highest members of the gang.

Grey had forfeited the right to sleep in the house a few months ago when he had done something else the gang had considered foolish.

Bart slid into the rocking chair beside him and held out a mug.

"What's this?" Grey didn't reach for the drink. He didn't want to take anything from Bart, not yet at least. He just looked at it.

It looked normal. He was pretty sure it wasn't poisoned. Bart would be more likely to shoot him. The gang leader wasn't a subtle man.

But that didn't make Grey eager to take the cup from Bart. He had just

lived through one of Bart's tirades, and Grey had a stubborn streak.

"It's a beer. Come on. You didn't even eat dinner."

Bart motioned toward him with the mug once again. The man was trying to entice Grey's rumbling stomach with some sort of sustenance.

Grey snorted. "Since when do you care if I eat my beans?"

"There was cornbread, too." Bart leaned forward to push the drink closer to Grey.

Grey sighed and took it. "I'm not thirsty."

"I'm sure you're not." Bart turned to look out at the sky.

For almost a minute, there was silence between them. It was like they were both trying to figure out just what to say to each other.

Nothing seemed right to Grey. He wondered if Bart felt the same way he did.

But Grey knew he would never ask those questions. They didn't speak of such things at this camp. They were all tough and impossibly strong.

They didn't worry about silly little things like feelings.

Bart cleared his throat. "Remember when you first came to the gang?"

Grey thought about it for a moment and then nodded. "Feels like an eternity ago."

"You were just a young'un. Barely knee-high to a grasshopper. Man, but you had some spit in you." Bart laughed at the memory.

"I don't anymore." Grey's voice was completely deadpan. He felt

drained of emotion.

“Right, that’s what you say, then you turn around and glare daggers at me when you mess up and get called out on it.”

Grey frowned. “That wasn’t it.”

Bart snorted, dismissing Grey’s argument before he could even really make it.

“Now, don’t you start talking like that. You were an ornery little cuss. Ready to do whatever you had to do.”

“You had me cleaning up horse manure,” Grey reminded him.

“I also had you taking care of tack and cooking meals. A little guy like you couldn’t do much more than that.”

Bart shook his head. “You could barely take care of yourself when I found you.”

“I was learning to,” Grey countered his boss. This conversation was going smoothly so far. That was a surprise after the way Bart had berated Grey just hours earlier.

That was part of the reason Grey had so much trouble sleeping. But Grey had never slept easily when he was frustrated or upset.

It just made his normal trouble sleeping worse.

“You weren’t doing a great job of it.”

“We still aren’t doing a great job of taking care of ourselves.”

Grey wasn’t going to let his side rest so easily. He had things to say and he wasn’t just going to let this get flipped around on him.

“That’s not what I’m trying to say.”

“Then why don’t you just say it?” Grey’s tone was a little snappy. It was probably a bad idea. Bart didn’t like it when people snapped at him.

He didn’t do anything about it, though. He just continued with whatever memory was in his head.

“You wanted to be one of us so bad. I had to have you guarded whenever we went on a job because you would try to follow us.”

“I didn’t know what I was getting into.”

Bart didn’t seem to notice that Grey was talking at all. The man was just going on about what he remembered.

“You kind of became a little brother to the entire gang. We raised you.”

Grey felt a pang of guilt deep in his gut. He knew the gang had gone out of their way to take care of him. He had been nine when Bart had found him.

The man could have easily killed Grey for what little he had. Instead, the infamous bandit had taken the kid in and the entire gang had helped turn the boy into a man.

Bart just kept talking. “You always hated sleeping. I would find you up all hours of the night. Never knew how you could get along with such little sleep.”

“I lay down earlier than all of you.”

“That can’t be it.”

“I drink less?” Grey offered another suggestion. “Never get blind drunk. Never see the need for it.”

Bart snorted as he took a sip of his beer. “A little prissy, if you ask

me.”

“I’m not prissy.”

“No, not really. But you get a little picky about the drink.”

“I don’t like passing out in the mud, that’s all. I saw so many people here do that.” Grey motioned over the camp.

“Guess we raised you right, then.”

Grey turned to Bart. “Is that why you came out here?”

“No.” Bart sighed. “I just heard you out here and I couldn’t sleep, either.”

“Why not? The job turned out well enough.”

Bart shook his head. “It’s not about the job. The job was fine. Just getting older means it’s a little harder to get comfortable. You wouldn’t understand that.”

“Are you saying that you’re sore from jumping onto a train?” Grey snorted.

It was so hard to believe that Bart could get older, but the man had already been grown when Grey was a child.

Bart had been the leader of the gang for years before Grey had shown up at his doorstep, half-starved and just praying for somewhere warm to sleep.

Bart had provided that. There was no way Grey could have earned his keep right away. No, the child had been given a chance to heal.

Grey remembered the times Bart had mentioned. It felt like so long ago. He had been blinded by the kindness a man like Bart could show.

Now, this was a gang that would leave a boy to die on the side of a train. Where had their standards gone?

He knew he couldn't say anything like that to Bart. The older man just wouldn't see it.

"Drink your beer." Bart motioned to Grey with his cup.

Grey took a sip. He was good at following orders without thinking. It was what had ingratiated him to the gang for all those years. They had raised a perfect little bandit.

But that bandit had somehow developed a conscience. Grey honestly had no idea where that had come from.

It certainly wasn't from any of the people that had raised him from the age of nine.

"Good beer," Grey commented, ignoring all of the things on his mind.

"Yeah, it helps when I have trouble sleeping."

"It's not trouble sleeping if I just never sleep." Grey shook his head.

Bart let out a soft laugh. "Just was wondering."

Grey didn't know if he wanted to ask the question, but it seemed like Bart was waiting for him to say something.

So, he tried to figure out what words he was expected to say there. "What were you wondering?"

"Why were you saving that kid?"

Grey sighed.

"He reminded me of me." It was just one small part of the real reason, but he knew Bart would never be able to accept the whole truth.

“Guess I just felt a little bad for him.”

“He wasn’t you.”

“I know that.”

“He had a family, just so you know.”

Grey sighed. “I know that, too. But at that moment, he was just alone and scared. I remembered feeling like that.”

“You’re going to have to learn to tell the difference someday.”

Grey gritted his teeth and didn’t say anything more.

Bart glanced down into his beer mug, then picked up the glass and downed the rest of the contents. He got to his feet. “I’ll leave you to it.”

That was it. Grey was alone once again. He waited for the door behind him to open and close before he released a breath that he didn’t know he was holding.

Grey put his beer mug down and rubbed his face. He couldn’t leave. These men were his family. They had been the only family that he’d known for his entire life.

His early life had been that of a homesteader, but he was an orphan now.

Grey’s parents were dead. They would be ashamed of his current occupation but wouldn’t have the ability to offer him anything better.

Grey had just been trying to survive, barely scraping by, when Bart had found him. They were camped out on his family’s land.

Grey had tried to run the bandits off, but they’d laughed at him. They must have thought it was cute to see that nine-year-old kid trying to



figure out how to use a rifle that was far too big for him.

When the bandits had found out about the situation Grey was in, they'd started to help him here and there. It had taken some time for him to be able to trust them.

They had long since left his parents' homestead. The land was nothing but a distant memory. He would never go back to that life. He couldn't leave these people.

These bandits were his family and they loved him, even if he didn't understand why they seemed to have no sense of guilt for the things they had been doing.

Grey sighed and leaned back on the rocking chair, forgetting about his beer. There was no way he would ever finish the entire mug. The beer tasted dirty.

It had been stolen from a different train, a freight train they'd robbed when it was stopped for repairs in the middle of nowhere.

That had been a very lucky haul. They had been able to make off with tons of supplies. But Grey worried about that. They had been doing so much in this area.

It would make people suspect that they had a base somewhere close.

That meant people could find them — or worse, set a trap that would end with everyone in the gang getting shot by a posse of armed men.

Ava marched toward the door. Her plan was to leave but, of course, she had been interrupted. It was like she couldn't go anywhere on her own, not anymore.

Her family had been acting so oddly lately, wanting to know where she was going.

She turned toward her mother and sighed heavily. "What is it?"

"Where are you going?"

"Just out to enjoy the garden." Ava was lying, but she didn't want to be followed or questioned further. She kept a book under her arm to try to encourage this ruse.

She knew just how to slip out undetected.

"Ah, well, remember to be back here by noon."

"What's happening at noon?"

"There are just some things we're going to need you here for." Her mother was always so proper. It led to Ava feeling a disconnect toward the older woman.

It wasn't that her mother didn't love her, the woman just lacked the warmth that made a mother bond with her child.

It wasn't her mother's fault that she had never been maternal. Plenty of nannies had given Ava that kind of warmth.

Her mother had always simply preferred to speak to Ava as if Ava was an adult. That had been happening since she was very young. Her mother didn't gush over her.

She was asked questions and expected her daughter to respond with manners.

"I'll be back." Ava knew she couldn't make that promise. If she managed to make her plan work, she would probably be late.

But Ava didn't care about that. She had her plans and was going to make sure she was able to follow through on them.

She bounced out of the house, pleased with herself. Her family wouldn't be able to ignore her wishes for very long. Not after what she was going to do.

She practically skipped out to her hidden spot in the garden, then slipped through the fence. Her heart was pounding.

She had to do this if she wanted any chance to do what she wanted with her life.

Her hands shook and she felt herself tremble. She had been here hundreds of times before, but this time was different. She wasn't coming as a customer.

A few people passing her on the street seemed to take notice of her trepidation. She waved them off before she could be questioned.

She couldn't let more doubt seep into her mind.

With another quick swallow, she rose and squared her shoulders before striding confidently through the door of the perfumer.

The man behind the counter glanced up at her, then smiled. He was older, a touch of gray at his temples. His back was straight.

She had seen him many times before. This was one of her favorite shops in town.

“Ava.” He greeted her by name.

She grinned at him. “Hello.”

“What can I help you with today?”

Ava walked over to the counter. “I was hoping you might listen to me for a moment.”

“Are you wanting a specific scent?”

She felt a little deflated at his assumption, even though she knew it was logical. Still, it hurt that no one would ever think she might be looking for a job.

“What is it today?” the perfumer went on, turning to the shelf and starting to pull down a few scents.

“I was hoping to work with you.”

“Work with me?” The man spun back to face her and cocked an eyebrow. “What do you mean by that, young lady?”

She folded her hands in front of her, hoping to look contrite enough to make him consider what she was proposing. “I’m hoping to learn the trade.”

The older perfumer leaned against the counter and looked her up and down. He had a frown on his face.

She was just grateful he wasn’t treating it like a joke. Maybe she could manage to do this.

It felt so unreal. Ava was starting to live her dream. She just had to get through this and get the perfumer to take her in.

She hated to let herself have too much hope. She had been expecting a solid and resounding negative response, but he seemed to be willing to listen to her.

She had to take a moment to steady herself and remind herself that it still might not work. He looked at her, carefully regarding her face.

She fidgeted nervously while he considered. She didn't think it was right to say anything yet. It was best to wait until he had come to some decision.

It felt like the silence had stretched on forever. She was uncomfortable when his answer finally came, and it wasn't ideal.

"I'm not going to hire you."

"Why not?" Her words were starting to get rushed.

"Because young women like you don't do jobs like this."

She frowned. "I've been studying. I've learned everything I can from books. I need to be able to learn from a master of the art."

"I'm not a master of the art." The older perfumer shook his head.

"We've been coming to you for years. I know you're a master of the craft. We love all of your scents."

The perfumer squinted at her. "What do you need a job for? You have the richest family in town."

"That's not what this is about. I don't care about their money. I just want to learn this trade. I want to make perfumes."

"I don't think you'd be right for the job." The man shook his head.

“Because I’m a woman? Or because my family has money?”

“Both, either, it doesn’t matter.” The perfumer shrugged. “I’m not going to give you a job here.”

“Then let me apprentice under your guidance.”

“You want me to take you as an apprentice?” The smile on the perfumer’s face showed that this was amusing to him.

She felt a little irritated that this was being treated like a joke, but she knew showing it would work against her goals. She had to keep cool.

She kept her shoulders strong, her face impassive. She had decided she would never show any sort of weakness over this.

It wouldn’t look good if she wilted at the first sight of trouble.

“I think I could bring good things to your business.”

“I’ll entertain this idea.” He dismissively waved in her direction.

She knew he wasn’t going to take her seriously, but this was a chance, at least. He was going to listen to her. She cleared her throat and started on her planned speech.

“I know I’m not someone you would expect. Young women like me don’t have jobs like this. It’s not normal, but I promise that I have a lot to offer you.

“I want to work in this business and I want to help with making beautiful perfumes. You sell a lot of perfumes to women.

“We all love your scents, but what if you could consult with a woman while you were making the perfumes? I would be a great help doing that.

“I know I could provide you with something that no other perfumer

has.”

“Is that so?” The man was looking intrigued.

Ava nodded. She was a little too eager, but she had so much to say to him. “Look, I have been reading about botany and perfume for years. Every chance I get, I study it.

“I know it’s an art and I need more than just books to teach me how to do this. And you would get help here. I could even help you sell to your women customers.”

The perfumer tapped his chin.

Her heart soared. “Women trust other women. They like to ask us for advice.

“They may even buy more if I can talk them into it. That alone would cover the small salary I would ask for.”

“Small salary?” He tilted his head. It was very clear that the perfumer found the concept amusing.

“Yes.” She nodded at him.

“Ah, that makes sense. You want to have your own pocket money.”

“It won’t be much.” She tried to cover for herself. The truth was that she just wanted some money her parents didn’t have full control over.

He nodded. “I’m sure.”

“I do want to make some money, but it doesn’t need to be a lot. My needs are taken care of. It would be a good thing for you.”

“Do you mind if I test your nose?”

She touched her face. Her nose didn’t seem to be injured or odd.

It took a moment for her to remember why he would ask something like that, but by the time she figured it out, she had already asked a stupid question.

“My nose?”

“A good sense of smell is the most important thing a perfumer can have. You have to be able to identify scents by smell alone.”

She thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “I wouldn’t mind doing that. What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to identify some base scents to start. We can get to more complicated scents if you pass this part of the test.”

She agreed quickly, eager to prove herself. She hoped her sense of smell was good enough.

The test went well; each time she identified a scent, the owner of the shop seemed more and more pleased.

This filled her with glee. She couldn’t help it. Every single test she got right made this feel more and more possible. She was going to get this job.

She bounced on her tiptoes, and the perfumer laughed at her antics as he kept checking her olfactory sense.

He finally finished and nodded. “You’ve done a good job.”

“Thank you.” She beamed with pride.

“I think we can work something out. But you have to be willing to learn.” He made the tentative offer. “We can discuss some things, like pay.”

“Of course, I don’t need that much. But I would like to get paid something for my work.” She repeated her request. “I’m just eager to



learn the trade.”

“It seems to mean a lot to you.”

“I’ll do anything to learn.” She felt like squealing with delight. “I won’t waste this chance. I promise.”

“I certainly hope you won’t. This is a good thing for you, yes, and I hope it turns into a good thing for me.”

“I can be here whenever you need me.” She nodded at him, the happy nod of a woman who had just been handed her dreams.

“Can you be here in the morning?”

A few more details were discussed and it was quickly set up that she would show up first thing the next morning. She truly had been handed her dream.

She ran out of there, tripping over her skirts in her excitement. She was laughing loudly. She had to tell someone.

Ava danced down the street to her house. Her hard-soled shoes tapped against the cobblestones like the drums in a band that only she could hear.

She laughed so hard that everyone she passed stared at her as if she had lost her mind. She clutched her book against her chest.

It felt like she had been handed the key to a charmed life.

She sang as she moved back through the fence, going back through the secret exit that she had left from.

**T**he garden was very quiet. There were no gardeners walking around in the flowers. Ava took note of it but assumed it didn't mean anything.

She was too absorbed in her good news to wonder about the subdued air of the property.

Ava felt like she was walking on air. Her feet barely touched the grass. She was dancing in the clouds. A servant passed her, looking surprised. "I've come to get you."

"I know about the meeting. I'm on my way." Ava sang her response.

That drew a muffled laugh from the servant. It was odd behavior.

There wasn't typically music or dancing in the house, unless her mother hired a band to impress some guests or throw a party.

Ava pranced back into the house, unable to believe her luck. Everything was going perfectly. Nothing in the world could bring her down from this joy that filled her soul.

She took no notice of the solemn atmosphere that had settled around the house.

Her mood couldn't be destroyed by whatever petty squabble was going on behind the doors of the place she called home.

She had amazing news to share. She didn't know how her parents would take it, but they would learn to accept her choices. She knew that.

She squealed and she burst into the house.

What she saw inside made her entire world deflate. Every bit of happiness seemed to be sucked out of the air.

Both her parents were sitting there, dour looks on their faces. There was no sign of amusement anywhere. Her parents meant business.

Bags were packed at their feet, and she recognized the luggage as hers.

"What's this?" Her heart was in her throat.

"We had the maid pack for you," her father explained. "You'll have everything you need for your trip."

"Why do I need to pack anything?" She stopped just inside the door. "I'm not going anywhere. We don't have any trips planned."

"You have one planned now. You're moving across the country." Her mother was just as formal as ever.

Ava wanted to scream. This was going to destroy everything she had been working for. Her mind was a rush of thoughts that didn't make sense.

She knew that she had to say something, otherwise this would just spiral out of control. She had to stand up for herself.

"I'm not going anywhere." She shook her head wildly from side to side.

Her father frowned. "You are."

She wanted to scream. “You can’t do this to me. I just got a job.”

“A job?” Her mother tilted her head. “You don’t need a job.”

“I don’t need a job. I want a job. I’m going to train to be a perfumer.” She put her hands on her hips.

Her father snorted. “This isn’t negotiable.”

“Everything is negotiable with you,” Ava snapped at her father. She wasn’t going to let this stand. “You can’t just send me away like this.”

She waved her hand at the packed bags on the floor.

“This is going to happen, young lady.” Her father’s tone became firm.

It shattered her to hear those derisive sounds. Her dreams should have mattered to someone other than her. But that wasn’t her world.

Here, she was someone to follow the whims of her parents. She didn’t have the freedom to make her own choices.

Her mother had referred to it as being chained to her family money before. When she had been younger, she hadn’t believed it, but now she knew the truth.

This wasn’t going to be something easy to sway them from.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because this is not a joke. We’re providing for your future. You need to put your childish dreams away.” Her mother’s back was stiff.

The woman was extra formal, obviously judging everything that Ava had ever wanted to be. Ava threw her book down on the floor. She was angry.

Her mother shot her a withering look.

It made her think twice about reacting to the situation with the rage she was feeling. At least physically. The words she spoke still dripped with venom.

“You can’t do this to me.” It was numbing to know that they absolutely could do this to her, no matter how much she protested. Her anger was starting to fade into pure fear.

She shivered. Nothing felt right. Her parents were planning something and it wouldn’t end well for her.

All the clues suggested that whatever it was would be something that she hated.

“What is all of this about? Why are my bags already packed? Shouldn’t you have talked to me before you decided to send me away?”

“This isn’t just a snap decision.” Her mother shook her head.

Ava didn’t believe a word of that. She was going to pursue every avenue to escape this fate. There had to be a way for her to get out of this.

It wasn’t right, what they were doing to her. Her parents couldn’t just send her away. They were supposed to love her no matter what.

But her parents weren’t those kinds of parents. They had conditional love. There was only care and support if she did exactly what they wanted her to do.

Ava hated that. It wasn’t right.

She shivered but didn’t back down. She wasn’t going to move away.

They couldn’t make her leave. She wasn’t just going to be tossed to the side because she didn’t listen to everything they had planned for her.

Her mother was watching her carefully, it seemed.

Ava's father, on the other hand, had a lot of things to say to her. He cleared his throat. This was an announcement.

No, it wasn't an announcement. At least, not just an announcement. This was a proclamation.

Her heart stopped in her chest.

"You should have come into the meeting last night."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"You would have met your betrothed." Her father was so matter-of-fact about it.

Ava found her father's attitude infuriating. He was treating the situation as if it was nothing. But it was everything to her. This was the end of all her dreams.

It couldn't be happening. It seemed impossible. How could they just volunteer her to get married? Just like that. They hadn't even asked her. "When?"

"The meeting," her father repeated. "You refused to come. We made the deal then."

"This has to be a joke." She was still in disbelief. "It can't be real."

"It is real," her mother intoned flatly. "You should have listened to us."

"I don't want to get married." Ava shook her head, wildly moving it from side to side as she stumbled back from the shock.

It still didn't seem real.

She wanted to run away, but her feet wouldn't move in the right direction. All she could do was fall heavily into a nearby chair, her heart pounding in her ears.

Her mother didn't comment, didn't give away anything she was feeling.

Her father looked a little concerned, but not enough to cancel all these plans. "I tried to talk to you about it."

"You never mentioned anything about it." Ava found her voice.

"No, we didn't. You didn't attend a single meeting about it. Now, the deal has been done and you're going to do your part."

Ava shook her head. "No, I won't."

Her mother pursed her lips, and her father gave her a look that would wilt a weaker woman.

"You will. Just because you felt you were too good to get married doesn't make it so. You've stepped out of your station one too many times, and you're going to learn to follow our orders."

"These aren't orders." She shook her head.

Her father frowned. "It's not my fault you never listen to me. You could have been warned before it came to this."

Ava scoffed. He was trying to make this out like this was her fault.

It wasn't her fault. She knew that. She didn't make promises with the lives of others. That was something her parents did.

"I think I would remember if you said something about selling me off to the highest bidder."

"I'm not selling you."

“That’s exactly what you’re doing. I don’t even know this man you’re marrying me off to.”

“You’ve met him before,” her mother said then. She barely moved when she spoke. It was like she had turned into a mannequin.

The woman was normally stiff, but this posture was much stiffer than normal.

“Who is it?” Ava found her feet again, standing and clenching her fists. She couldn’t take this lying down. They couldn’t do this to her. It wasn’t right.

Ava decided she would stand up to everything her parents were trying to do to her.

“Leighton.”

She wrinkled her nose. She knew exactly who her father was talking about. She had met the man before. Ava wasn’t interested.

“The old man? I can’t believe you would make me marry him.”

“Not the old man. He has a son about your age. Maybe a little bit older than you,” her mother explained.

“We wouldn’t engage you to a man that’s more than twice your age.”

“How would I know what kind of monstrous thing you would do? This man’s age doesn’t make it much better.”

“You don’t get a say in this,” her father reminded Ava.

Ava stomped her foot. “You aren’t going to do this to me. You can’t!”

“We can and we are.” His voice held a note of finality.

It broke Ava’s heart to hear it. This wasn’t right. It couldn’t be



happening to her.

She rushed off, tears flowing down her face as she fell onto the bed in her room. But she couldn't stay hidden from reality for long. Her bags were already packed.

That meant they were ready for her to go that day. She would be forced to leave the only home she had ever known to marry a man she had only met in passing.

Her room felt hollow somehow. The pretty pastels and browns that made up the furnishings and bedding felt less like the beautiful hues she had picked out years ago.

Now, it was just a cage. She could almost see the bars over the window.

This was her fate. She would never know what it was like to live the life of a hard-working perfumer. It just wasn't in her cards.

She shivered as the cold world sunk in. All her dreams were destroyed. There was no way she could support herself on a small salary from a perfumer.

She was certain she wouldn't be good as a wife, but she knew she would have made an excellent perfumer. That was why she had to get that job.

How was she going to tell the man who had taken her as an apprentice about this? How could she even start to explain that she had been given to someone else in her father's business deal?

She was being sold off. It felt terrible.

Her father had condensed her worth to a dollar amount — and she had a feeling that it wasn't a very high cost for the Leighton family to pay, either.

Grey blinked awake. The shouting had already started. He couldn't quite make out what was being said, but it did sound like Bart was in quite the state.

He groaned and slowly crawled out of the bedroll. Hopefully someone had made the coffee — he was going to need it that morning.

He just wanted a normal day when he wasn't exhausted from the moment it started.

Bart's words weren't coming into focus fast enough and Grey slowly stretched as he made his way out of the tent.

"Get your gear on," his boss snapped at Grey.

Grey rubbed his head. "What's going on?"

"There's another train coming through. We're going to go get it."

Grey frowned. He didn't like that idea. He didn't like the idea of robbing anyone anymore, but this was something more.

Bart looked at him expectantly. "What do you have to say now?" The older man didn't look like he wanted to hear any criticism.

But Grey was too tired to care about the right way to tell the gang leader what was on his mind. It was hard to tell if anyone would even listen, anyway.

He could smell coffee and groggily made his way to the porch to get himself a mug.

Bart roared out more orders at the gang. A lot needed to get done before they struck the train — horses had to be prepared, gear needed to be cared for, guns had to be loaded.

But all of that would wait until everyone got themselves dressed. The gang was barely moving because the sun was just starting to peek over the horizon.

Nobody would be ready to do much talking until they woke up more.

Bart was a whirlwind of activity, rushing through camp and shaking tents or kicking sleeping people. It was time to get moving.

Grey was thankful he had woken up to the shouts. It meant he wasn't going to have to do this while he was nursing a bruised rib from Bart's pointy boots digging into his side.

He remembered having to live with that pain before.

It had taken him a while to start waking up to the rustle of activity that came when the gang had to do something early in the morning.

Bandits weren't known to be early risers.

Most of the camp seemed to be nursing hangovers. They had spent the last week drinking away their loot from the last robbery.

Grey walked over to Bart. He had to say it. "I don't think this is a good idea."

Bart's eyes flashed with anger. "Don't talk back to me."

"I'm serious. We just robbed a train a week ago."

Bart shook his head. "Just because you've gone soft doesn't mean the

rest of us have.”

“It’s not about being soft. They’re going to be looking for us,” Grey explained.

Bart shoulder-checked Grey and moved on to wake up more of the gang.

Grey sighed and began getting ready. This wasn’t a fight worth having. It wouldn’t matter what Grey said, either. Bart was determined to take another train.

And that meant the whole gang would help him rob that train.

The fact that there was still a lot of heat from their robbery a week ago wouldn’t deter the bandit leader from this course of action.

Grey bit his lip whenever he heard the other bandits talking about just how good the loot had been lately. The truth was that all of this would force them to move on faster.

They would have less time to stay in this nice little farmhouse, and Grey had been starting to think of this place as his home.

He wanted to come back to it someday and stake a claim here. Even if it meant he would have less money.

Farming was honest work that people didn’t judge. Nobody was afraid of farmers.

He dreamed as he splashed water on his face, trying to clean up at least a little bit.

The water was cold, sending a shock through his system. The gang rarely made the effort to heat the water they used to clean up.

Nobody talked to him. Maybe they were worried Grey would stop this robbery. His bleeding heart had gotten him into that kind of trouble a

time or two before.

It took almost an hour to get the entire camp ready to move in on a new train. “How long are we riding?” someone asked.

Grey didn’t say anything. He couldn’t figure out how to make the sounds in his throat, much less form them into words when they crossed his lips.

“It’s on the other side of Oak Ridge.”

The memories flooded Grey the entire way to town. It had been such a lovely place, back so long ago. Almost five years now.

He had almost gotten married, convinced he was in love with the tavern girl he danced with every night he was in town.

Grey used to sneak into town after the gang was asleep back then. No one seemed to care where he went or when he left.

She had captured his attention and he’d thought she was his fate. Grey felt like she had been the combination of every single dream that he had ever had.

He had loved her. He still loved her, even with her gone.

It broke Grey’s heart every single time she crossed his mind. They had spent nights dancing and talking, sharing so many intimate details.

Grey hadn’t talked about the robberies at first. That wasn’t something someone just shared.

Besides, it had taken weeks to finally get her to share her name, and then months more until he thought her more and more open to the life he wanted to lead.

He didn’t tell her he was planning to leave the gang until he had saved up every possible coin and was ready to never return.

As the gang approached Oak Ridge, he remembered that last conversation. They had been walking down the street late at night. The only light had been from the moon.

Quiet conversations had poured easily between them. It was perfect.

Grey had money in his pocket. He was ready to leave the gang.

He had never told Bart. The leader of the band would never forgive him for being so close to leaving the only family that he had.

Bart could never understand what it meant to love someone as purely as Grey loved Rebecca.

That was destined to fail, however. It all happened when Rebecca had broken his heart. He had poured his heart out to her, letting her know exactly who he was.

He was ready to leave the gang. He had announced those words to her and hoped she understood what that meant.

This gang didn't just let people leave whenever they wanted. Bart demanded complete and total loyalty.

The leader would have killed Grey if he found out that Grey was telling their business to a tavern girl.

She hadn't been happy about any of it, and it broke him that day. Rebecca had walked away from him, letting him suffer in the madness this kind of work could bring.

Grey knew he would never know peace as he had known with Rebecca.

There were only so many chances at a special kind of love like that — and he had thrown it all away by tossing his lot in with train robbers all those years before he had even met her.

His memories didn't stop coming. There was no way to stop them. Grey just tried to stay with the group as they rode.

No one talked. It was important to stay as quiet as possible, even if they could be seen for miles on the plains.

If they didn't attract undue attention, no one would ask a single question about what they were doing.

Bart led the way. Grey was happy to follow; it was easier than having to focus through thoughts of Rebecca.

The woman haunted Grey every time he even came close to Oak Ridge. She had left town not long after his confession.

Grey had no idea where she had gone. There had been no way to find out.

**A**va played with a string of beads in her lap. Her family wasn't Catholic, but one of her nannies had been.

She had picked up the habit of idly saying the rosary when she was troubled by the wonderful woman who'd taken so much time to raise her.

She didn't pay much attention to what prayer she was on with the count, however. Her scrutiny was on the plains, though there was nothing of interest out there.

They had barely passed a single building. It was just a lot of flat land and tall grass.

She sighed. This was a bad sign.

Her body slumped into the train's plush seat. She had to try to relax.

She couldn't change her fate. Her parents had promised her to a man she hardly knew, and he had moved to California.

How could she pursue anything now? It just wasn't right. Her parents were monsters for doing this to her.

Ava hadn't even taken the time to properly say goodbye to her mother and father. She knew it had hurt them, but she didn't care. She was hurting worse.



A glance out the window reminded her that there was nothing new to see. She was still in the plains. It was boring, just the same surroundings everywhere.

Maybe there was something interesting out there on the plains, but she couldn't see it from the train. Her mind wandered over her weakness.

She should have done something about it. She should have run away, left with nothing, and made her own life. But she'd never had the will to do something like that.

She concentrated on the books she had read. There were many plants and flowers that could be used in perfume on the plains, even if the scenery was less than impressive.

What kind of a life could she make if she got off the train at the next stop instead of traveling on to California?

She hadn't seen this part of the country before.

Ava had been born and raised in a comfortable life that had never seen her venture further west than the western border of Massachusetts.

Her family had occasionally taken trips to the coast, but that wasn't going to happen anymore. There would be no family excursions to various places.

Her destiny was to be the wife of the son of one of her father's business associates. It just felt so terrible, knowing how much she meant to the people that mattered the most to her.

She had been trapped by duty to her family. The fight had been catastrophic.

Things were said that nobody could take back, but in the end, Ava knew she had to go. She wasn't going to destroy her father's livelihood

by not doing what he expected of her.

She knew Charles was rich. The man had a mansion waiting on her, and he was excited to have a bride.

Most women would consider themselves lucky to find a man like the impeccable Charles Leighton, who would be willing to take care of her every need.

But she just couldn't feel grateful for it.

Ava felt off-kilter. The world was swirling around her. The hit had come so suddenly, but all the clues to foreshadow it had been there.

She wanted to make a life for herself. It wasn't possible, but she had always dreamed of living her life with freedom, able to come and go as she pleased.

She had been able to slip out on occasion, but that wasn't real freedom. She'd never had that pleasure. Her life had always been planned out for her.

Her parents couldn't know what she had done, could they? How could they have found out and put this together so quickly? She hadn't talked to anyone about the job.

This had to be a coincidence. It was the only thing that made sense.

Would he have books for her? She didn't know if he even liked women who read. What if he hated every single thing about her?

She had a lot of time to ponder the possibility. She was already certain she would hate everything about Charles. Why shouldn't he feel the same?

She shook her head and reached into her bag, pulling out a jewel-encrusted perfume bottle. It had been a gift, something from many years ago.

The object in her hands was an antique.

It was a dream that she couldn't have anymore. Her life had changed so much in just a day. Nothing was going to get better.

She had thought it was her destiny to create something bigger out of her life. But her parents had ruined everything by signing her up for this.

She was on her way to the new life everyone had planned for her without her opinion on the matter. The decision hurt her.

She didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was the amount of money her marriage would bring into her family.

The perfume bottle glittered, the gilded metal of the container seeming to capture the light around it. It shone so brightly that it attracted the attention of the elderly woman in the seat next to hers.

She seemed like a nicer older woman, someone whom Ava would have held the door open for when she was out shopping.

But Ava wasn't in the frame of mind to carry on a conversation.

The older woman spoke in a shaky voice. Her age was more prevalent in the fragility of her words than it was in her face. "What's that, dearie?"

Ava shrugged, not wanting to answer. But she knew that it would be rude to turn the lonely-looking old woman away from a bit of company. "A perfume bottle."

"Isn't that a fancy one?" the woman asked. "How old is it?"

"At least fifty years. We can't tell anything before that," Ava explained slowly. "It was a gift from my father. It doesn't have much left in it, anyway."

The old woman tutted at Ava. "You can always refill it. That is so lovely. It must be quite the treasure."

"Thank you." Ava nodded.

"You seem to have a lot on your mind."

"Nothing, really," Ava lied to the other woman. It was just easier to not lay out everything that was troubling her.

"Oh, well, do you have a different perfume that you could put into it?" The older woman's eyes glittered with excitement.

"Not at the moment." Ava frowned as she shook her head. This conversation was uncomfortable. She turned back to the window.

The woman didn't seem like she was finished yet. "May I see it?"

Ava held it up for her, and the old woman ran her fingers over the surface.

"I used to have a bottle like this, way back when I was a young woman."

That caught Ava off-guard. The woman's smile brought her a little bit of comfort. She eased back into her seat. "Did you?"

"It was a wedding gift from my husband."

Ava felt her stomach clench. She didn't want to think about husbands. She didn't even want to be on this train. "I think I'm going to try to get some sleep."

"Rest well, dearie." The older woman patted Ava on the shoulder while the perfume bottle was carefully stowed away with her other belongings.

"I'll try." Ava gave a wry smile as she rose to her feet. Her small bag

was gathered up and she headed off to her sleeper car.

Her parents had been kind enough to give her this small comfort for the journey, even if they were angry at her.

The fight had continued simmering until the moment she had been taken to the train station and handed her ticket.

She was angry, ready to stand up to anyone that got in her way.

By that point, though, there was no taking any of it back. The promise had been made and it would be kept.

The room was well appointed and comfortable, but it wasn't fancy.

It had a simple bed built into the wall, a place where she could sit if she appropriated the pillows in the right position.

That was what she did, pulling a book out of her bag to read as she traveled. Trains were nice if you had the money to afford some space of your own, she decided.

She curled up, pulling her feet up under her knees so she could slump against the pillows. Sleeping would come once the sun went down.

She turned to pull a cord by the door, asking for a drink when the porter came to check on her. She was quickly provided with a glass of water that she placed onto the small table next to the bed.

Ava was grateful she didn't have to talk to anyone while she was in the room. While spending time out in public was nice, it did get rather draining.

She was nursing the pain that came with all of her dreams being lost to the expectations of a family that would never truly understand her.

She felt like a petulant child when her parents spoke of the only life she would ever have, the world they had cursed her to. She didn't

want this.

From what she had seen of Charles Leighton, the man had to be absolutely insufferable. Granted, she didn't know his character well, but still.

Ava sighed and looked out the window.

The plains stretched out forever. She couldn't see a single hill on the horizon. It was painful to view just how flat her surroundings were.

Her stiff joints popped as she tried to find a comfortable position on the bed.

Ava couldn't stay laying down. She felt restless. She fidgeted and tossed and turned, then sat back up to look out the window.

She could see just a bit of movement off in the distance. She almost didn't pay attention to it at first, but for some reason, it seemed to be closing the distance between the horizon and the train.

Ava squinted, her heart speeding up.

Reaching up to pull the curtain out of the way, she pondered what would be closing in on a speeding train. Not much could keep up with a train running smoothly along the tracks.

Horses? Whatever was out there was starting to come into focus.

She didn't know why horses would be chasing a train, though. At least, not until she recognized the fact that every single horse had a rider.

Horses couldn't keep up with trains for long. Ava wondered if they were testing their speed or something like that.

It seemed like that would be something young men would do when they were bored without the attention of their parents.

The men seemed to be singularly determined, racing toward the train. She worried about what that meant.

The only reason she could come up with was train robbers, but she didn't think that happened to passenger trains. Those were just tales from adventure novels.

She watched the riders, and one of the men caught her eye. He had a serious look on his face. A shiver ran down her spine. She felt like she should tell someone.

The reality started to hit her hard. The only reason riders would keep up with a train would be because they wanted to get onto it. Maybe train robbers *were* a problem.

Her heart stopped and she knew she had to act, even if she didn't know exactly what kind of action she could take. She was just a woman. She wasn't a warrior.

All she could do was hope and pray that she was doing the right thing at any given moment and wouldn't end up dead if she made a mistake.

She felt faint, but it didn't last for long. She wasn't one to just sit there and do nothing — she tried to respond to fear with action.

Something was so wrong here. She stood up, sending her belongings scattering out of her bag when she accidentally kicked it.

It was two steps to the door, but by the time she took those two steps, she reconsidered. It might be safer for her to stay there and ring the bell outside to warn someone if they hadn't noticed already.

Ava wasn't capable of saving herself. She wasn't a fighter. Her words were the closest thing that she had to a weapon.

If she were to be accosted by thieves while she was trying to help warn people, she wouldn't be able to do anything to stop them.

She rummaged through her bag after ringing the bell, trying to find something to defend herself, and put away some of her belongings that had fallen out of the bag.

The perfume bottle slipped out of her hand, clattering to the floor. She cursed herself and just left it where it was for the moment.

She had to hide her money and maybe find a weapon first.



G rey could just make out people inside the train. His back tensed when he saw it: A young woman, staring right at him through the window of a sleeper car.

His heart skipped, then started pounding like a drum.

She looked confused, like she was trying to make sense of what he was doing riding beside the train.

When she pulled her head back, he found himself missing her. A part of him wanted to start right on the car that she was on, but it wasn't the way the gang did things.

She wouldn't even notice him, anyway. He would just be another in a group of bandits, come to take her belongings.

He would not be a good guy, and there was no chance of him ever doing anything more with his life than what he was doing in this gang.

Men like him didn't ride trains, they robbed them. She would never know him as anything other than a source of fear.

He was about to destroy her day. He didn't want to be a part of this job, but there wasn't much choice in the matter.

Bart wasn't going to call it off just because there were women and children on board. These were some of the best robberies they did.

He sighed and pulled his bandana up over his face. He wanted to get through this quickly. The faster and smoother this job went, the better.

He couldn't focus on the beautiful woman at the window of the train.

They had to overtake a car farther forward so they could move back toward where they would exit the train in their typical fashion.

Grey tipped his hat at the woman through the window. She glanced away from him.

He had no idea why he had done that, but from the soft blush on her cheeks, he knew it was worth it. He would never have a chance with a woman like that.

And the possibility would be even lower once he robbed her of her valuables, but that stolen moment would probably stick with him for the rest of his life.

He made up his mind to make this as painless as possible. His hands shook a little as they all rushed onto the train, starting to filter into the cars.

Children started to cry, a sad sound that Grey heard all too often. They were terrified. It broke Grey's heart.

As far as he knew, none of the gang killed their targets, but that was only slightly comforting.

Grey felt guilt settle deep in his roiling gut. He couldn't pull himself from the tears in that child's eyes. No child should ever feel that kind of fear.

He had felt that before. And he was thrown back into a past of being alone in the world with no one to help.

That was the world he had been in before he'd found his way into this

one, the one where he committed crimes just to survive.

Grey pushed through the urge to freeze again. He had to get this done. He forced his way through the aisle, behind the crowd with his bag out and his gun in his other hand.

Grey tried to look as intimidating as possible. He couldn't let his doubts show.

He waved for the passengers to put their valuables in the bag, spreading out from the others to cover his area of the train. It didn't take him long to end up in a car of his own, working down the passengers there.

A little girl sobbed in front of him. He had to fight back the tears. Her fear bothered his soul. She clutched a locket to her heart as she cried. Her mother tried to pull her back.

Grey held out the bag, like he was doing it automatically. "Just give up what you've got, no one will get hurt."

He hoped they were going to make it easy for him.

The girl's mother started to gather up everything to pass it over, but the child didn't seem to be willing to part with the shiny gold necklace around her neck.

Her mother tried to remove it from the girl's neck.

The girl shrunk away from him, shaking her head wildly from side to side. "N-no."

"I promise you won't get hurt. You just need to hand it over."

The child couldn't have been more than nine. The fear in her eyes nearly made him fall to his knees. "I... I can't. My daddy gave it to me."

Grey knew he was going to have to do something, though. One of her parents could die for her refusal to follow orders. He turned to her mother. "Get it off of her."

Her mother's hands fumbled a little bit. "I'm sorry, I'm trying."

The little girl was still fighting; she didn't want to give her treasure up. "No!" The child shouted.

Grey knew her cries might call someone over to him.

He waved the gun, trying to indicate the rush. "Please hurry. I don't know how long until someone less understanding shows up."

The child's mother seemed to take it as a threat. It wasn't one, but it thankfully made her hurry a little bit more.

He sighed and glanced around. None of his companions were near him.

Grey leaned in, speaking softly. "You should hide it on your person, somewhere they won't see it, if you want to keep it."

The sobbing child took a moment to register what he was saying.

Grey glanced back as the door to the car started to open.

He hissed. "Hurry, or they'll take it."

The little girl nodded quickly and pulled the necklace off, secreting it into her shoe. Grey proceeded to collect the rest of the belongings from the family.

He was grateful that no one would notice the favor he had done for that child. There was no one around to see what was going on. But it wasn't that way for long.

Soon, he had walked away from the terrified victims of his actions,

heading down to the next car. Whoever was coming up behind him moved quickly to catch up.

“Got everything handled here?” It was Bart’s voice.

“Yeah, I got everything from them.” Grey hoped the gang leader couldn’t hear the lie in Grey’s voice.

It must have worked because Bart nodded and pushed Grey toward the next car. It was time to move on and steal more stuff from all of these potential victims.

Grey wondered if it would be better to stick with Bart, but the decision was quickly made for him as Bart started to head in the same direction that Grey had come from.

But he walked right past the sleeper cars. “Take care of those, will you?”

“Sure.” Grey nodded and made his way to the first door. The door was locked.

He rattled the handle at first, hoping someone would open it from the inside.

Grey couldn’t hear anyone inside the room, so he put his shoulder against the flimsy wooden door and forced his way in.

The place was empty, but there was some luggage left behind.

Whoever had rented this room must have been in a different part of the train. That meant he could rob whoever this was without having to deal with them.

Less risk of someone getting hurt that way.

There wasn’t much in the bags. He cursed to himself. He needed more.

Bart already thought that he was too soft, and if he ever gave the impression that he wasn't pulling in as much loot as the others in the gang, Grey knew it would end poorly.

He would probably be left high and dry.

He did a little more checking, pulling out a small stack of bills from where they were stashed under the thin mattress.

That was something, at least.

He got up and headed back to the hallway. There were a few more sleeper cars for him to go through. Hopefully, they were all just as empty.

The next door opened right away. It wasn't locked.

But the place wasn't empty, either. A young woman rose to her feet, half in a panic, pulling her body out from under the bunk.

There was something in her hand, but he wasn't paying attention to that. His eyes were fixed on her face.

She was beautiful. Delicate strength caused her shoulders to straighten when she saw that he had a gun in his hand.

Grey couldn't talk at first.

This was the woman from the window, the one he had tipped his hat at.

He knew she didn't recognize him. There was no way she could tell one robber from another. But her face called to him.

He saw her in a light he had never seen anyone in before.

He was hesitant to call this attraction. How could he be attracted to a woman he was about to rob of her valuable belongings? But there was

something about her.

She came from money, her clothes were well made and nearly new. Wherever she was traveling to, she had the money to have some space of her own for the journey.

He wondered what her name was. He wondered if she would talk to him if they had met in a different situation.

Would she even notice him if he didn't have a gun in her face?

She started to shout wordlessly, making noise that would call the other bandits to possible trouble.

If she did that, Grey knew Bart would end up coming to his aid. Bart was the closest of the crew, as far as he knew.

If he caught her calling for help, the leader might kill this poor woman. Grey didn't want her death to happen because she wouldn't cooperate.

He shushed her. "Keep your voice down. Trust me, I'm the one you want to deal with here. The others aren't as nice."

For some reason, she listened to him. It took him a moment to recover from that surprise.

But then her face contorted, frustration playing over her features. "Why should I trust you?" Her voice was still loud, and the fierce look in her eyes captivated Grey.

"Just calm down. Nobody has to get hurt." He brandished the gun at her again.

"Right." She moved whatever was in her hand behind her back.

"What's that?" Grey caught the flash of gold as it moved. That was something valuable. He was going to have to take it.

“Nothing for you.”

This woman was strong. It took him aback to hear her so unyielding. He wanted to let her keep it and stepped back slightly.

She looked like she had won a major victory during this confrontation. Grey still had the gun, though.

“Just don’t do anything stupid and no one has to get hurt.” He tried to make it very clear. “We’re not here to hurt anyone, and we won’t unless someone gets in the way.”

She frowned at him but didn’t seem to have much to say.

The way she was chewing on her lip while she tried to decide just what to say melted his heart.

It was wrong to feel that way. She was just a random woman on the train, someone they were going to rob.

And if he didn’t get whatever she was hiding from him away from her, Bart would show up and she would probably get hurt.

But she didn’t say a thing. She didn’t produce the item. Grey was at a loss.

He wasn’t willing to shoot her over this. He wasn’t even sure what the item she was trying to hide was.

It could have been brass. He’d only caught a glimpse of it. It would be a shame to kill someone over a brass knick-knack that she happened to carry around.

“What is it?” he demanded. He couldn’t freeze up again.

“Nothing of your concern,” the woman snapped at him, but there was definite fear behind the anger that she was feeling. “You can’t have it.”



He didn't want to have to frighten her, but he had to make her move. There wasn't much time. "Just hand it over. Don't make me have to hurt you."

There were no real teeth in his threat. He knew it, but he could only hope she couldn't tell he didn't actually want to take something that seemed to mean so much to her.

Her hand was shaking, and her eyes darted back and forth. Her face flushed. The girl was in a half panic. He briefly wondered if she would faint.

That would probably make his job a lot easier. He could just grab what he wanted from her and she wouldn't do anything that would make him have to prove his point.

He couldn't go back with an empty bag. He had given up that necklace, and if his bag was too empty, it would just look like he was going soft on their victims.

Which was the very thing Bart was already upset with him for.

**A**va clutched the bottle behind her back. Her heart was racing.

This man had a strange look in his eyes, but she couldn't identify it with half of his face covered by the bandana he had pulled over his nose.

There was something about his eyes. They were grayish blue, like a stormy sky.

If it were a different moment in time, she might have fallen for those eyes. They were oddly kind.

It felt like she was stuck in a dime-store novel, a tale where a handsome bandit swept the young heroine away from her troubles and into a life of adventure.

But this man wasn't like that. He was dusty and cruel. He wanted to take the perfume atomizer that had built her dreams. She couldn't let that happen.

She loved this bottle, even if she would never live up to the hopes it represented.

There had to be something she could do. This man was going to take everything she had left. It was the only thing she had to cling to.

Her life was in complete upheaval. She hadn't even been able to explain to the perfumer that she wasn't going to be able to take the

apprenticeship.

She had just been swept onto the train and off to a brand-new life she had neither asked for nor wanted. It was just her lot to never truly be able to do the things she had dreamed about doing her entire life.

Those dreams had never mattered to anyone but her. Her family hadn't cared. It was about business advantages to her mother and father. She was a resource to them.

She felt like she had given up her humanity when she had gotten on that train.

The only parts of her dreams that she had left were the trinkets she had brought with her. They were worth money, but the money wasn't worth what they meant to her life.

This perfume bottle more than any other item she had with her.

And now this bandit, a thug with a gun, was going to take the last of her dreams away. She knew she couldn't let that happen.

She drew from that pain, used it to help her stand firm as she faced down a man with a gun pointed in her direction.

"Just hand it over." He motioned to the arm that reached behind her back.

Ava stomped her foot loudly. "No. You're not taking it."

The bandit shot a glance over his shoulder, looking toward the front of the train.

Part of her wondered why he kept looking around. He couldn't have been worried that someone would see him; his face was covered.

But he was obviously worried about something.

He turned back to her and made a hurried motion with his gun, sweeping the hand up like he was telling her to hand it over. “Just give it to me.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m not going to.”

“I can’t guarantee your safety if you don’t.” He almost sounded like he was begging, but she knew bandits didn’t beg. That had to just be wishful thinking on her part.

This man didn’t care about her. He was probably going to shoot her before this was all over. A shiver rushed down her spine.

She shifted her weight from side to side, trying to figure out what her options were.

The bandit’s motions were getting more hurried. He was looking over his shoulder.

Then he reached toward her, yanking on her shoulder until her hand came from behind her back. The man grabbed at the gold perfume bottle.

Ava held tight. “No, it’s mine.”

He sighed. “I can’t let you keep it. I’m sorry.”

His apology took Ava by surprise. She wasn’t going to let him get his way, however, no matter how much he pleaded.

She made the decision then and there that he would have to shoot her before she let go of her prized possession.

She started tugging back, trying to get her precious belonging away from him.

He sighed and pulled his hand away. A rush of victory hit her. She had managed to keep her bottle, at least for the moment.

She heard boots approaching. The bandit started and turned toward the steps. Whoever he saw made him straighten up and look more intensely away from her.

For a moment, she thought she might be saved. Someone must have come to help her. But that hope was quickly dashed when another bandit came around the corner.

This man looked older; salt and pepper hair peeked out from under his hat and he had the bandana up over his nose, just like the man who already held her at gunpoint.

“What’s the holdup?” The new man on the scene spoke with a gruff voice.

“Just getting her to hand over the goods.” The bandit that had originally accosted her shrugged, like taking her dreams wasn’t a big deal.

“I’m not giving you anything.” Ava stood a little straighter. “You all think you can just take anything you want.”

“We can,” the older bandit snorted. He sounded like an angry horse.

Her mother had told her to avoid horses that snorted like that. It probably translated to this situation.

Ava knew she was probably being silly for holding on to trinkets this tightly, but she didn’t care if the metaphorical horse stomped on her.

“You can’t. I’m not going to give this to you.” She squared up to him, the top of her head barely reaching his shoulders.

He looked down at her, and there was no kindness in his eyes.

Ava wished she was still standing up to the softer of the two, the younger bandit who didn’t seem to be as capable of violence.

But she had chosen her path and she was going to see it through.

The large man laughed at her. He must have thought that this was a joke. They both knew there was nothing that she could do to him. She had no way to really fight back.

Fear laced through her bravado. She didn't want to die, but she didn't want to lose her bottle, either. Her mind seemed to be making the wrong decisions.

Warning bells were going off, telling her she should just give it up and survive this encounter, but her heart wouldn't let go, wouldn't let her back down.

She had to keep this front up. Her father used to tell her that it was all about projecting confidence even if she was unsure. It had been helpful many times in the past.

It was those words that kept her strong. Maybe if she appeared strong, the bandits would leave her alone.

So, she continued with her lecture, hoping that something would sink in.

"You can't just take things. There are jobs. Maybe you should get one of those instead of robbing innocent people."

The gray-haired bandit snorted. "Right, like you would know anything about getting a job. Hand it over." He reached for her atomizer.

She yanked it back away from him.

The younger bandit turned to the older one. His words were rushed as he indicated the relative silence around them. "We need to get off this train."

"Everyone else is gone," the gray-haired bandit grunted. "Let's just finish this bit off and get on our way."

Ava wanted to scream. These men were monsters. They didn't care who they hit as long as they could take things that didn't belong to them.

She wasn't going to relent. "You two should just go before you end up getting arrested."

"You don't have a leg to stand on, little missy." The older bandit laughed. "Why don't you just hand it over."

He reached out to her, trying to take her bottle.

She yanked it away from him and darted past the younger bandit. She barely managed to squeeze out of the door. She was moving beyond human comprehension.

It wasn't a decision, rather something her body did automatically. She started to run as soon as she had the space to pick her knees up.

There was only one direction to go: toward the back of the train.

Someone grabbed at her skirts, but she didn't turn to see who it was. She just yanked the fabric free.

The ripping sound filled the train car.

The sound was deafening, echoing in her ears louder than the dull roar of the spectators in the car as she ran through, but she wouldn't mourn the dress.

It was just a dress. She had more of them if she needed them.

The perfume bottle couldn't be easily replaced. And she couldn't be easily replaced, so she had to get her body out of there.

Ava knew if she was caught, it would probably end with her losing more than just her perfume bottle.

Moments after she freed herself, she felt the stomping. The men were giving chase.

She ran like her life was on the line, because she knew it was. If those robbers started shooting, she wouldn't stand a chance. Dodging bullets was an impossible feat.

She made it to the door and threw it open, rushing over to the next car.

Her feet were flying so fast she didn't even panic when crossing the small gap between the cars. She just knew she had to get out of there.

She turned as she burst into the next car, slamming the door behind her and trying to throw the lock. The other passengers stood up as she rushed in.

The door flew open again, the older bandit rushing in behind her.

Ava nearly fell back as she stumbled away, trying to turn around faster than he could catch her. She was screaming for help.

One of the men in the car stood up to block the path of the bandits, giving her just enough time to get out of reach before the older man managed to toss the challenging passenger to the side.

She heard the thud of her defender's body hitting the chairs with a loud thud and the crowd gasped. They wouldn't be helping after a show like that.

Ava just hoped the man would live. The blood of another passenger was the last thing she wanted on her hands.

Ava screeched as she bolted through the car all the way to the end of the train. There was nowhere to go from there. She wouldn't be able to get out.

But trains didn't go on forever. The trail would end here, with her



cornered and alone, facing two bandits who may very well want her dead at this point.

She turned around just as the older bandit cornered her against the railing. Her breath caught. This was it. The end of the line for her.

Whatever he wanted to do to her, she would be forced to withstand.

A small part of her hoped he would just leave her alone, but she knew she would never be that lucky. It simply wasn't the way her life worked.

She screamed at him, wordless and angry, trying to swing at the brute.

The bandit smirked, grabbing her hand before she could make contact with him. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Leave me alone." She yelled the words right into his face. Ava couldn't get her hand out of his grasp; she yanked so hard it made her wrist ache.

"Is that any way to talk to me after what you've done?" He was pure swagger and rage, a truly terrifying combination.

He knew he had the upper hand and that none of her bluster mattered at all. The lies would lead to her getting hurt or killed.

"I'll talk to you any way I want to." She didn't stop. It was almost like any other way to react had fled from her mind.

"You're a smart mouth. I almost like it. Too bad you're still going to lose." The bandit reached down and plucked the bottle from her hand. "Looks like it's mine now."

Looking down at it, he smiled.

A shiver ran down her spine. She was almost sure she was about to die for her insolence.

Her mind flashed through all the decisions that had led her to this exact moment and she regretted almost all of them.

It was all a mess.

Grey could barely keep up. Passengers were getting in his way and the woman and Bart were pulling up ahead of him.

He tugged his arm loose from a man who tried to stop him. The grip wasn't particularly strong, and the man who reached out to Grey was in an awkward position.

It made it easier for Grey to extract his arm from his hopeful attacker.

Another passenger tried to grab at him and Grey brandished his gun at the would-be hero. The passenger dropped back down into his seat.

It was clear from there. Grey had a straight shot right up to the back of the train.

Bart had already tossed one of the men into the seats, leaving the passenger unconscious from hitting his head. Grey didn't have any time to go check on him.

He would have to leave that man to the care of the other passengers.

That violence made the crowd less eager to get in his way.

Grey had to get to her before Bart decided that her life wasn't worth leaving alone. Bart had killed before, and he would do it again if he was crossed and insulted.

That woman had been nothing but insulting to them. She had hit at

their pride in ways that would sting any man.

Most jobs didn't end with anyone getting hurt. Most people were smart enough not to resist the robbery as it was happening.

There were few lawmen on board, if any, but in a previous robbery one had stood up to Bart. The man had ended up dead, shot and tossed off the side of the train.

This woman wouldn't stand a chance.

He had to catch up.

Grey cared about her, but there was more than that to it. She was the most beautiful woman that he had ever seen in his life.

He hadn't thought anyone would surpass the woman who had broken his heart, but her strength was making him start to fall a little.

He knew it was silly to feel that way. He didn't have a chance with a woman like that, even if he wasn't a criminal. He hadn't come from money.

His parents had barely been making ends meet before their untimely death.

The leader of the gang wasn't a kind man and had little patience for those who weren't directly in his care. She was a victim and that was all he would ever see her as.

Grey didn't have time to explain to the other passengers that he was trying to save the woman. All he could do was shove them to the side and fight his way to the door one step at a time.

By the time Grey got out to the back of the train, Bart had the woman backed up to the railing. She was leaning back as far as she could go, trying to stay out of Bart's reach.

The tracks rushed under the train. It was a perilous position for anyone to be in. There was nowhere for her to go.

Bart reached up and snatched the perfume bottle from her hands. "You stupid woman. Don't you know anything?"

Grey winced when he heard the anger in his leader's words. He had to say something, but he fell silent, unable to figure out what he should say.

The woman was shaking; it was hard to tell if it was fear or rage or a combination of the two. Grey didn't have the time to ask those questions, though.

Maybe it would be something he left himself to ponder later.

For now, he had to try to stop this before a young woman ended up dead because she was too attached to one belonging.

He wished Bart had left with the others. Or that he'd just walked past, leaving Grey to deal with it. But that was never the case.

She wasn't silent, trying to push Bart away. The woman grunted with the effort of trying to move a much larger man away from her. Her shoves were useless.

"Get off of me, you brute."

"A brute?" The insult made Bart laugh, and the sound was grating. "Little girl, you have no idea what a brute actually is."

"We only hurt people who can't follow simple instructions. People who think their money is worth more than their life. Come to think of it, that sounds kind of like you."

She scoffed at him. "Just leave. You'll never be worth what you've taken from the good people on this train."

“Don’t start acting like you were doing this for them. You just wanted to keep your pretty bottle. And that was worth everyone’s life to you.”

“Yes, and you’re nothing but a worthless thug. You’ll never be anything more than a thief.” She treated the bandit with scorn, but there was the sting of pain in her voice.

Bart had hit her right where it hurt. He had attacked her decency. Good people were offended by things like that.

It was the type of insult that couldn’t touch a man like Bart, but it was one Grey knew very well. He was the soft-hearted one, the man who didn’t want people to get hurt.

He didn’t even want to be in this business. He wanted to do honest work, pull in enough pay to take care of himself and whatever family he chose.

But he had never managed to rob someone of a job. Those things were far more powerful than anything they physically carried with them.

Grey knew this wasn’t going to end well. He wanted to say something, but the conversation seemed to be going on without him being there.

It didn’t even matter that he was there.

Bart sneered. “Look, little lady, I know it feels good to be brave, but you’re really in trouble. Don’t you get it?”

The woman stuck her chin out. Grey was taken aback by her audacity once again. She was special.

He hoped Bart wouldn’t kill her, not just because he abhorred violence, but also because a loss of someone like her would hurt the world by denying it her power.

“I get it, but I don’t care. You’re a monster.”

“You seem to have a lot of awful names for me. You might actually hurt my feelings.” Bart was taunting her.

Grey felt his heart sink. He tapped Bart’s shoulder.

The bandit leader shook off the touch, completely ignoring anything Grey was doing. His boss had eyes only for the sassy woman that they were trying to steal from.

Grey glanced out behind the train. The only horses left were his and Bart’s. That meant the rest of the gang had gotten off the train successfully.

At least his brothers in crime had survived. He may regret this job, but that wouldn’t be one of the regrets he would hold for the rest of his life.

Bart squeezed the woman’s hand. “Look at me, young lady. You’re going to end up tossed off the train if you don’t just pass over what you have.”

“I’m not going to give you anything.”

Grey noticed that the bauble was already in Bart’s hands. He wondered what the man was looking for.

Did this woman give any clues that she might have something more, or was he just looking to put more terror into the heart of this particular victim to make her think twice about standing up to thieves in the future?

Grey winced. Bart had the upper hand and this woman was playing right into whatever verbal trap he laid out. She was way out of her depth.

Bart was a hardened criminal that ran a gang of dangerous men, stealing things from innocent people. He was not capable of compassion for a woman in her state.

The look on Bart's face chilled Grey's soul. He wasn't going to have any of this.

Grey had to do something, but he had no idea how he could save this woman. Bart had this woman on the ropes.

That was just how the bandit leader had always enjoyed his victims. The older man loved it when people felt helpless.

It might have been a sickness. Grey didn't really know. He wasn't an expert on that sort of thing.

Grey stepped up, trying to push his worries aside long enough to try to stop any needless violence. The woman truly wasn't a threat.

She just couldn't do anything against the two men that had stepped into her life and turned it upside down. She was strong. He appreciated that about this mystery woman.

But she was also rich. Her ripped dress was made of fine fabric. It would be difficult to replace out west. He examined the woman while Bart stared at her menacingly.

She had some very lovely jewelry on, a pretty necklace around her dainty neck. It probably wasn't worth much, it was just a glass costume fake gem set in in fake gold.

That was what ladies like her usually wore while traveling.

Still, the gang could easily make a few coins on a piece like that. They had buyers who would sell fancy-looking jewelry to people who couldn't afford the good pieces made with actual precious metal and gemstones.

"Don't do it."

Bart's head snapped toward Grey. "You don't tell me what to do."



“She can’t do anything to you.”

Bart twirled the prize in his hand. “She can’t, but she needs to learn her place.”

There was cold fury in his voice.

Grey stepped forward. He didn’t know why he was sticking up for this woman.

He had been warned that he would lose everything if he continued trying to protect their victims. It was a terrible idea. The gang was his only family.

He thought of them as he did something that could very well leave him with nothing after all of this. “We need to go.” He tugged on Bart’s arm.

Bart shoved Grey back against the closed door behind them.

Grey felt the air forced out of his lungs.

The woman took advantage of Bart’s distraction and brought her knee up between his legs.

Grey winced as the blow connected. That had to hurt.

He could almost feel it in his own gut. It was a straight reaction to the pain of another human being hit in a place that every man feared.

Bart grunted as his eyes grew wide.

It was a painful blow, and not one that even bandits would use. It just felt dirty to strike at a man’s most sensitive areas. Grey couldn’t blame the woman, however.

She was backed up against a railing and could easily fall off the train. If that happened, it would likely lead to her death, even if she didn’t

die from the fall.

There was no way a woman like that could survive on her own in the middle of nowhere.

Grey got up again, reaching for Bart. "We need to leave, now." He spoke in an urgent hiss, hoping that Bart would take the hit and limp away.

"Not yet," Bart grunted as he straightened back up. "I've got to deal with this little lady first."

"You've got nothing to deal with," she snapped at Bart.

There was no way she could stop him if Bart actually decided to kill her. He was sure that she had to know that as well, even if she didn't show it.

Her bravery was admirable, but misplaced. Bart was not a man to be trifled with. He was dangerous if someone crossed him.

Whoever this woman was, it would take some work to help her survive this.

He knew he had to do something to help her. "Bart!" he yelled for his boss.

Bart half-turned toward Grey. "Shut up. I'm dealing with something."

She once again took advantage of the big man's distraction and tried to squeeze away from him. Bart roared in rage and picked her up.

Her feet kicked out at him, flailing wildly. It was a valiant effort, but ultimately useless. The woman was going to suffer Bart's wrath.

Grey grabbed Bart's hand. "Come on. We need to go. Just leave her."

"Go, I'll be right behind you." Bart didn't even look at Grey. The man

was staring hard at his victim.

Grey shivered. “No, I’m not leaving you here. Let’s just go. Leave her here.”

Bart sneered and tossed her off the back of the train.

Grey’s heart sunk. He stood there, stunned in his tracks. There wasn’t much he could do to save her.

Bart grabbed Grey by the shoulder. “Off the train. Now.”

Grey nodded mutely. He didn’t want to follow Bart. What the older bandit had done felt unforgivable. He had sentenced that woman to death on the plains.

There was no way she would survive. She hadn’t even managed to tuck and roll properly. There was a chance she hadn’t even survived the original fall.

He had seen the kind of damage a fall like that could do to a man even if he was trained in it. The smallest misstep when disembarking from a train moving at full speed could lead to massive injury, maiming, or death.

“Get moving.”

“Right behind you.” Grey didn’t want to move ahead of Bart.

Bart seemed to assume that the man was going to run away with him. Grey knew that his words might have been a lie, but he had to have a moment to make that decision.

The bandit leader leaped off the back of his train, landing in the saddle of his horse.

Grey had a decision to make. His horse was on the left and Bart’s victim was on the right.

He didn't have long to make the decision. He dove, landing in a roll on the ground, and began running toward her.

Ava stared up into the sunny sky. The world spun slightly sideways, making her vision turn as she lay flat on her back. She wouldn't be able to move any time soon.

She didn't feel any pain — at least, not at first — but she also couldn't move, blinking up at the sky. It was blurry. She couldn't see straight.

The world felt like it was shaking. Maybe it was just suddenly coming to a stop after moving for so long.

With that adjustment, along with the way she had come to her abrupt landing, it was so hard to make sense of what had happened to her.

She had rolled several times when she hit the ground, tumbling hard. Her body would be covered in bruises.

She could feel the small dots of blood tracing along the scrapes that had blossomed on her exposed skin. Ava knew she had never been hurt this badly in her life.

Everything just felt odd. She couldn't breathe, her lungs were screaming. She couldn't figure out what to do or say.

Everything was buzzing, the world seemed to flip and switch around quickly. She felt like she was on a seesaw and a merry-go-round at the same time.

She still couldn't believe what had happened. It didn't feel real. She

wondered if she had died when she was thrown off the train.

Ava knew this wasn't what heaven was supposed to be, but maybe she hadn't made it to heaven? She didn't know what she was doing there.

She'd thought she lived a good life and did the best that she could, but maybe her desire to fight against the bonds of society had landed her in eternal torment.

It took her a few moments to realize that she was actually still alive, just breathlessly on the ground after having rolled behind the train.

Her shoulder was sore. She remembered it hitting something hard during her tumble, maybe the tracks, but she didn't know for sure.

The clouds were fluffy little happy pillows, dancing across the sky, but her vision was spinning, making it look like a mobile on top of a crib. It felt oddly familiar to watch it.

She didn't have any conscious memories of her time in the crib, but she had been told about the clouds by her nanny many times. The woman had shown her the mobile as she had put it away to save for whenever Ava had children.

It was funny how her mind wandered while she was laying there, racked with pain.

She tried to speak, but it took extra effort. And the words hurt by causing reverberations in her chest.

Her breath came in great heaves and shakes. She couldn't stop her body from shaking. The pain was all-consuming.

But she noticed the small details around her, even through all of the agony. The grass waved around her. There was a light breeze.

She really couldn't feel it on her skin because the tall plants were shielding her from it. She could only see and hear the wind.

Everything hurt. She wasn't sure how she had survived being thrown from a moving train.

Her equilibrium pitched and heaved, making her head swim in the uncertainty.

The sounds of the train were growing fainter. She would be entirely alone soon enough, there was no way the train would stop just for her.

She couldn't see her surroundings. Ava couldn't move her head without the dizziness and pain causing her to be hit with a rush of nausea.

She gagged, but managed not to make a mess of herself.

Her blood rushed in her ears. She was injured, but she couldn't be sure how bad the injuries were. Her sides hurt. As sense returned to her, she heard steps approaching.

She started to scream, for help and for protection. She didn't know if it was that horrible bandit coming over to finish the job and she knew she couldn't do much about it.

He could easily kill her. Ava had to hope it wouldn't happen that way, but she wasn't going to give in to him.

She was only lucky the man hadn't pulled out his weapon back then, but it might be too late now.

She tried to get up, fighting back the urge to release the contents of her stomach.

But she barely got herself up onto one elbow before she fell back down onto her back with a groan. Her ribs were in massive pain.

It felt like the time she had fallen off of the back of a horse in her father's stable. A time in her life when she had more freedom.

She had fallen and bruised her ribs, and had been unable to move then. But there had been someone to save her, to pick her up off the ground and help her get around.

Now, she didn't have that kind of help. She was alone in the wilderness.

Not alone. She had to remind herself of that fact. She could hear someone approaching.

The face that appeared above her head had beautiful steel-blue eyes. It was the younger bandit.

She tried to get up. It didn't work, once again. She fell back down.

"Leave me alone," she cried out, bringing her hands up in front of her face. "My father won't stop if you touch me again."

Her feet kicked out. She couldn't connect with his body, not in this position.

The bandit didn't respond to her panic. His voice was calm and slightly irritated. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Just leave me alone. Go back to your stupid gang." She rolled onto her side. It was a different way to try to accomplish the goal of getting to her feet.

The pain soon put her on her back again. She couldn't do anything. She tried not to scream, but she did squint her eyes and started to breathe heavily.

She couldn't focus, her eyesight starting to blur from the sheer intensity of the agony that rushed right through her body.

The young bandit squatted down next to her. "Let me help you."

"I don't need your help. Just go back to your gang."



“You can’t be out here in this condition.” The beautiful-eyed bandit reached down to her.

She shoved his hand away. Her father had always told her about pride being the cause of most downfalls, but she didn’t care.

She didn’t want him to put his hands on her, not even if she actually needed the help. “Don’t touch me. I’ll be just fine.”

“You keep saying that, but I’m pretty sure it’s not true. I came to help you. I don’t condone what Bart did. He’s nasty and mean.

“I don’t want you to die here like this because of what he did.”

She scoffed. That hurt her ribs, so she ended the noise with a hiss of agony. Trying to take on this battle had ended in a pitiful show.

Fighting the pain just seemed to make it worse. She knew she was a fool for not accepting the help this man was offering, but she also knew she couldn’t trust him.

“Just go back to them. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

He sighed and sat down next to her. “I don’t think you’re thinking straight.”

“I’m thinking perfectly fine, thank you,” she snapped at him. “I don’t want to be anywhere near a bandit.”

“Take a look around you.” His gaze was on her. She didn’t know what he was thinking, but he didn’t seem to want her dead.

It was a little confusing to hear him trying to help her, but she was certain there had to be some sort of trick going on. Maybe this was just another way to torment her.

A trick that they liked to play on people who had the nerve to fight back.

There might have been a difference between train robbers and monsters that would torture others, but from where she sat, there wasn't much that gave her faith in this bandit's desire to actually help her.

"No." She closed her eyes, denying his request. It was a childish move, but she didn't care what this man might think about her.

"Just take a moment to look around. We're surrounded by plains. There isn't a single sign of civilization for miles. You can barely get up. I want to help you."

She laughed. Then she gasped in pain and kicked a few times, clutching at her bruised ribs.

Every breath hurt, but laughing or speaking too loudly made her vision blur from the sheer agony of the motion against her ribs.

She knew it was only the bruises stopping her from drawing in a full breath or moving too quickly, but the pain didn't stop the fear she was feeling.

This man could easily kill her in this situation. She didn't know why he didn't just get it over with.

He should have just killed her on the train. It would probably be better than the sheer suffering that made it hard for her to even think.

She tried to get him to go away several more times, shooing him off and telling him she could take care of herself. She knew it wasn't true, but she couldn't take help from a man who was brandishing a weapon at her.

It felt like a joke. How could this man be the one who came to her rescue?

It was impossible.

He didn't listen. Instead, this infuriating man sat right at her side and waited for her to calm down long enough to listen to him.

Her resistance didn't last as long as it should have. The pain got to her and she started to struggle to breathe. It was too hard to continue ranting after it got to that point.

The young bandit with beautiful eyes spoke again. "You're surrounded by plains. There's nothing for miles. I know it hurts. I know Bart did horrible things to you. I saw it.

"I know I couldn't save you, but I want to help you. I'm here if you need me."

She managed to cough out another sentence. "I don't need you."

Another sigh escaped his lips and he slowly got to his feet. "I can't make you accept my help. I tried, but I know you don't want it."

She watched as he turned away. The doubts about her decision were starting to creep in the cracks of her strength.

When she didn't speak, he added, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry this happened to you. I know you can't trust me, but you can't survive out here on your own.

"You're going to need help."

She shook her head. It made her dizzy. There was no way she would admit it, but she worried she might have hit her head harder than she thought during the fall.

"I don't need your help."

"You're going to need someone's help. I'll see if I can find someone else to help you." The man hung his head. She wondered if his shame was her own wishful thinking.

She wanted a hero. No, she needed a hero.

There was no way she would get out of this alive on her own. Any predator would make an easy meal of her as she lay there, struggling to even move.

He hadn't said those words, but she knew it was what he meant. If he left, she would be at risk. She might not even survive long enough for him to get help.

Maybe it would be best for her to swallow her pride. Whatever his game was, it couldn't be so bad that death would be a better option.

Guilt hit her right in the gut, causing a pained gasp to escape her lips. She didn't know what she was going to do. Things were going horribly.

This was even worse than the life she'd thought she was going to be trapped in.

This man was her only hope to survive this.

He had been absolutely right, and it was just wrong. He shouldn't be the one to save her. She hated the fact that she couldn't save herself. She wasn't strong enough.

It was what had made her life turn out the way it was. That lack of control and strength was what had put her on that train in the first place.

She had to stop him and ask him for help. Ava reached out with her arm, but his back was already to her.

He was walking away slowly, giving her a chance to change her mind. Or maybe her doubts were flooding in and making a moment feel like it took hours.

Ava really couldn't tell which.

She choked when she tried to speak; it was hard to get any words out. She wanted to be strong, but it was so hard to do anything without help.

She struggled back over onto her side, pulling herself up on an elbow once again. Each time she tried, she got a little closer to standing.

That gave her hope that she might be able to get up on her feet properly.

The bandit must have heard it because he turned toward her again. His bandana was down now, and she saw that the man was handsome and about her age.

Ava blinked at him, taken aback by the weathered look of his cheeks.

He was still young, but he had seen a good bit of the world around him, living out under the sun, rain and wind and it showed. She could see it as plain as day.

He turned to walk away.

She stretched her arm toward him again and then called out, "Wait."

The way he looked at her made her nervous. His eyes didn't judge, but the pity in them made her hate her own weakness.

She immediately regretted asking him to stop. It was probably going to end badly for her. Ava didn't know anything about this man except the fact that he robbed trains.

You couldn't trust a thief. They didn't go out of their way to actually save people.

There was a distinct possibility that she would regret this, but there was only one way to find that out. She had already taken that step.

He was going to help her, because she had asked for it.

**G**rey took his hat off as he knelt beside this strong woman. She had fought his help so hard. Her pride gave her a fierceness that he felt a certain attraction to.

But it wasn't the time for that. It would never be the time for that. There was no way this woman would ever trust him.

The realization caused him a slight heartbreak as he went to help her to her feet.

She pushed him away, determined to do it on her own. She had tried and failed several times already, but she was a stubborn woman.

"Let me help you." He kept his voice quiet and calm. "You're going to hurt yourself worse."

"No, I can do this." She grunted in pain as he reached for her yet again.

He pulled his hands away and observed as she rolled over onto her side and tried to push herself up while she held her injured side with her free arm.

"You should—" He stopped himself before he could say more. The last thing he wanted was for her to send him away again.

This woman needed his help. He knew that. A blind man could have seen how badly she was struggling.

Her pretty hair stuck to her scalp, matted with sweat and dirt. It was taking everything she had to rise to her feet.

Her breath was heavy, her eyes half-lidded with the effort. But, eventually, she managed to get onto her feet.

He rose to his own. "Can you walk?"

She grunted and took a testing step. Once she was confident in her own balance, she nodded. Still, he didn't know how long her ability to move would last.

He took a moment to look around their surroundings. His horse was nowhere to be seen; the animal must have gone back to the bandit camp without him.

He wondered what Bart would think when the horse came back with no rider.

Would his friends even miss him? Or would they celebrate that he was gone?

He had been the walking, talking moral compass of the gang, trying to talk them out of hurting others. With him gone, there would be no one to stand in the way of Bart's sadistic hatred of those better off than he was.

His wonderings were cut off by his companion starting to speak.

He turned back to her.

She held her side as she said the words that must have been bothering her. "Where are we going?"

"I can't think of anywhere to go except for town." Grey shrugged.

"How long until we get to town?"

He took a moment to look around again. A part of him hoped his horse would run up like an angel, but it wasn't the case. The horse was still nowhere in sight.

He sighed. "A week's walk. But we'll get there."

"There has to be another way."

He couldn't blame her for thinking that way. He didn't know if she would be able to make it all the way to town. She didn't look like she had spent much time out in nature.

He rubbed his head and then placed his hat back on. "I don't know what to tell you. It's the only option we have."

"How can that be the only option? There has to be somewhere else we can go. Someplace where we can get help."

He looked her over. She was heavily injured. Walking would be hard, but she didn't want his help. He couldn't force that help on her.

"There's nothing we can do other than that. This is the West. This isn't like out East."

She frowned. "Which way are we going?"

Grey checked the position of the sun and then pointed. "That way, we'll be following the tracks. They should lead us to the next town."

"Is there a faster way?"

"Not a path you can take in your condition." Grey was being honest. She wouldn't be able to make it.

She stumbled forward before starting to walk a little steadier. Grey took the lead, starting to head down the tracks.

He wanted to offer to help her again, but he knew it was a terrible



idea. She hadn't broken her pride yet. She wouldn't accept it. She might even find the need to snap at him.

He knew it would be a matter of time until she couldn't push on further. She was struggling to move along. She had to get to town and the sooner that happened, the better.

Grey let her figure out how to move easily. He made sure not to walk too quickly, knowing it would be difficult for her to keep up.

She grunted for the first quarter of a mile or so. It took far too long to travel that distance.

He was partially afraid that she would fall down, so he made sure to stay next to her, within reach to stop her from hurting herself worse by taking another tumble.

"Take your time."

She nodded. "I am." Her voice was softer.

Maybe she was starting to trust him. His heart soared.

Another quarter mile. She was starting to struggle some more.

He finally had to ask. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

She shook her head. "Don't touch me."

"I'm not going to put a hand on you, but maybe there's something I can do that doesn't mean touching you?"

She shifted her weight, taking a moment to rest. There was nowhere to sit, so she just stood there. "We need to discuss some rules."

He sighed. "Rules?"

"Yes, rules," she snapped at him. "You know, ways you will be

expected to behave around me.”

He was taken aback. He knew she was prideful, but this sounded like the pride of a princess rather than someone with the strength she had exhibited before.

She had to accept his help, and it wouldn't be the kind of life she was expecting out here on the plains.

Desperate times called for desperate measures, but she would have to learn that on her own.

Grey sighed. “What rules do you want?”

She squinted at him before she started to speak. “I want you to understand that I'm only trusting you out of duress.

“I don't believe that you are a good man and I don't know what your game is. But I want you to know that I'm not going to fall for any of your fake overtures of friendship.”

“We're not friends. You've already made that very clear.” He knew it wasn't the right thing to say. “But can I ask you a question first?”

“What is it?” she grumbled at her guardian.

“What's your name?”

“What does that matter?”

He sighed. “We're going to be on the road together for at least a week. We might as well know what to call each other. I'm Grey.”

“I'm Ava, stop distracting from the rules.”

He held his hands up. “Fine. Tell me the rest of your rules, Ava.”

There was poison in her voice as she addressed him.

“I understand bandits like you don’t have any respect for a woman’s purity, but I’ll have you know that any funny business won’t be tolerated.”

“I won’t touch you. I’ve already said that.” He sighed. “You don’t have to tell me again.”

“Another thing.”

“What is it?” He didn’t know if he even wanted to hear what else she was going to tell him.

“I’m a lady.”

“That’s very obvious.” He felt like rolling his eyes, but it would be a bad idea.

She was angry enough as it was. Making it worse would only make him regret his decisions more than he did in that moment.

She wasn’t going to let up. Maybe he deserved this kind of rudeness. He knew he had tried to rob her, but he wasn’t the one who had tossed her off of that train.

He had even tried to stop Bart. She must have forgotten that.

He hadn’t meant to be sarcastic with her, but she was delaying their progress. Her stubbornness was already going to make this trip take even longer.

If she would just let him help her, she could lean on him and he could get her moving faster. But instead, she wanted to lay down her ground rules, whatever they were.

“Just listen.” She had to take a few extra breaths between her words. It must have hurt her to speak so strongly. He wondered why she willingly did it. He hadn’t hurt her.

“I’m listening. What is it you want from me?”

“There will be no foul language.”

“Is that what you care about? Cursing? Lady, you’re barely on your feet.”

She waved off his sensible words. “Stop. That doesn’t matter. You’ll be on your best behavior.”

A sigh escaped his lips. “I’ll try to be on my best behavior. Can we get moving again?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Just as long as you understand. I have no interest in courting.”

“What does courting have to do with survival? I’m just trying to get you to town safely. I know I’m not rich enough to court a woman like you.”

That was a tiny jab and he knew it.

She frowned, having heard what he was saying loud and clear.

He couldn’t help it. He thought she was being silly.

These were ridiculous, given the situation. She was some kind of princess that expected this kind of behavior from people who were doing her a favor.

Grey was honestly glad he hadn’t been born rich. He could have done something just as insufferable as she was doing to him right then.

His body shook as they turned back to leave.

There was silence and he took a moment to figure out what he had on him. He had lost a few of his items during the fall off the train.

“What are you doing?” She spoke from just a step behind him.

“I’m checking to see what I have to help us survive.”

“Oh, I see.” She fell silent once again and Grey held back another sigh.

She seemed to just pull these frustrated breaths out of his chest. It wasn’t an attractive reaction to the words she spoke, but she had already made it abundantly clear she wasn’t attracted to him, anyway.

“I’ve got a few items that should help. I’m sure we’ll be fine.” He shrugged.

“What do you have?”

They kept walking. She didn’t speak a lot when she was moving because it seemed to hurt more than she could handle.

He turned out his pockets, showing a knife and some other small tools. He had no food, but he did have a tin can in his small pouch.

“That’s all you have?”

“I didn’t exactly plan to be stuck out here.” He shrugged. “I would have planned better if I knew I was going to save a woman out in the middle of the plains.”

She bit her lip and fell into silence.

He was just fine with that. If every conversation was going to turn to her lecturing him, they would probably need to speak as little as possible.

He didn’t try to start a new conversation. There wasn’t much to say to her.

Grey did worry, though. She was struggling. He wanted to offer to let her rest, but he knew the farther she could push herself, the quicker

this trip would be.

She would probably just yell at him, anyway.

Eventually, she did speak. "I had a question."

"What is it?" He wasn't sure he wanted to answer. She would probably just be upset at him no matter how he responded.

"Where are we going to sleep?"

He rubbed his face. "I hate to say it, but we'll be sleeping outside."

"Outside?" She stumbled a bit in surprise. "We can't sleep outside."

He stepped up closer to her, but didn't reach to help her.

She frowned heavily, and he shook his head. "We're not going to have any choice in the matter."

"There has to be another way."

"There isn't. I'm sorry. I wish I could do more for you, but this is it. We're just going to have to survive until we can get to town."

She bit her lip. "I don't like that idea."

"I take it you've never spent the night outside?"

Ava shook her head. "No, never."

He wanted to say something comforting, but he wasn't sure anything he said would be taken as any sort of comfort. "I don't know what to tell you.

"I know it's not ideal, but it's the only choice we have. There isn't anywhere else to go. It won't be easy, but if you keep fighting, you can do it."

“What makes you think that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know for sure, but it’s better than any other option. We don’t have a lot of options around here.”

She fell into silence again and they continued to walk through the plains. She was struggling, so it was easier for both of them to stay silent.

**A**va took her time sitting down. Her arm clutched against her side, providing support for the bruised ribs that made it so hard for her to get around.

She knew she was being stubborn, but she didn't care.

This was the furthest thing from a happy situation. She couldn't stand being there with this man, trapped in the middle of nowhere, far away from any form of civilization.

She was attracted to him, but she certainly didn't want to show that. Her hand was promised to another man. And this Grey was a bandit.

He probably didn't have any future. And she wouldn't be with a man who made his living stealing from others.

He frowned and looked up at the sky. "I guess we can stop here for the night."

"Thank you." She gasped for breath. Her side was starting to hurt more now that she was able to finally rest. Maybe because it was all she could think about.

"Do you think you can start a fire? There's a small stream near here. I may be able to catch some fish."

"How?"



"I'll make a spear and try to stab it." He started looking around the camp, not at her. He picked up a stick and tested it. "It might just work."

She snorted with laughter, taking note of the direction of his gaze. "Really?"

"What would you have me do? We have to eat." His words were matter-of-fact as he started to walk away.

She felt a little ashamed she hadn't thought about that. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it." He shook his head, stopping before he left her sight. "I'll get it done. You'll have something to eat tonight."

"You don't have to do things like that for me." She was grateful for the offer. He had no reason to be helping her, but he was still doing all this.

Because of that, she had to keep fighting as hard as she could. She couldn't make herself a larger burden on him than she already was.

The thought of being a helpless damsel bothered her.

"Yes, I do. I promised I would help you. You won't survive without food." He sighed. "I know this isn't ideal for you, but if you can start that fire, it'd make it a lot easier."

She made up her mind. She was going to try to pull her weight in this journey. "I'll get the fire lit."

He seemed to take her at his word. "I'll also try to bring you some water."

She bit her lip. This man was trying to help her. Without him, she wouldn't be able to get home safely.

She had to try to be nice. Snapping at him like she had already done

wouldn't make him want to stay with her. "I can start the fire."

He nodded and walked off into the tall grass.

She shifted her weight and climbed up onto her knees. A few seconds later, Grey returned with some branches of the small bushes. "These should help."

"Thank you." She nodded.

He walked off again. He must have been mad at her for the demands she had put on him. Maybe she had been out of line, but she couldn't help it.

She already felt this initial attraction to the man, and if she let that grow, it would just get worse and worse.

She struggled to stack the wood. She had no knowledge of the proper way to do any of this, but she didn't want to tell him that.

But there was a good chance he had already figured that out.

She was glad she was alone to try to figure it out as she carefully pulled the grass and put it into the fire. She tried to remember what she had been told about starting fires.

She needed some flint and steel. Grey had left some with the wood.

She grabbed the tools out of the stack and tried to fix the wood as it fell down. This was taking longer than she'd thought it would.

Every movement made her feel more sore. She had walked too far with the injuries she had sustained from the fall off the train, and now every movement made her want to scream.

She kept trying, but for some reason she couldn't get the grass to light at all.

She grunted in frustration as she felt hands wrap around her from behind.

Ava jumped, but Grey's voice calmed her back down quickly. "It's not hard, I promise."

"How does anyone do anything like this?" She heard the whine in her voice and blushed. It was embarrassing to sound like a petulant child around this man.

He laughed lightly. "You're not striking it quite right, let me show you."

She let him demonstrate. His hands were over hers. She never knew she would need a skill like this.

Grey didn't seem to judge her lack of knowledge, though. He patiently helped her learn how to properly start a fire and soon they had a good flame going and starting to spread over the wood.

"Wow." She felt accomplished. She had done most of the work, under his guidance. That was amazing. Ava had no idea that she would ever be capable of something like that.

Her family had had servants to light the fires. A maid made sure that her fire was going before she was left alone.

It was rare that she even had to put more wood on an already lit fire. Servants had just always been around in her old life.

This was so new and she found it kind of exciting. She felt a certain childlike glee and bounced a little, but not too much because her sore side made it difficult.

"You did a good job." He nodded at her.

She realized what she was doing. His arms around her felt so comfortable, she didn't want him to pull away. Those feelings were

dangerous.

She shoved his arm off. "Remember the rules."

"I was just helping."

"I know, but we still need to be proper about this."

He sighed, looking like he wanted to snap at her, but must have decided against it because he changed the subject. "I brought some dinner."

"What is it?" She knew it was a stupid question. He had just gone to fish.

"I got us a fish." He walked over to the edge of their small, rough camp and picked a spear up off the ground.

The wood wasn't strong and must have broken when he'd caught that fish. They wouldn't be able to take that with them after this, but it had been useful enough.

"I didn't know I had taken that long." She frowned.

"You didn't. I just got lucky, that's all. Are you hungry?" He held the fish toward her.

She nodded.

As Grey got to cooking, she noticed he seemed to really know what he was doing. She was in awe of him.

"Is this how you normally eat?" she asked, curious about how comfortable he seemed to be.

"Fish are pretty good. This is one of my favorite meals, actually." He started to use the knife to clean the fish.

The fish smelled like the water, but it was still identifiable as fish, especially when he was dumping the guts off a bit away from the camp.

She'd thought it would smell worse than it did.

She leaned in, curious to hear what he had to say. He actually knew how to do these things. Maybe her savior wasn't as bad as she'd originally thought.

Without him, she wouldn't be eating.

"Really?"

He nodded. "What about you?"

"The cooks sometimes make fish."

He blinked at her. "Cooks?"

"Yes, I have cooks at home."

He looked surprised. "You have more than one?"

She felt a little self-conscious about the wealth she had been born into. She knew most people didn't live like that, but she had no idea there were people like Grey out there.

She wondered what it was like to not purchase the food that she ate. This man seemed more comfortable catching and gathering what he could.

"Uh, yes, but it's not important." She shook her head.

"Hmmm." He seemed thoughtful.

"What?" She looked at him, her eyes wide.

“Nothing.”

Her lips tightened. She didn't know what to say, but she wanted to know what he was thinking about her.

He seemed to notice her expression in the firelight. “It's just that I wouldn't have expected a woman with cooks to be as tough as you are.”

She shifted uncomfortably. “Is that a compliment?”

“It's supposed to be one.” He nodded, turning back to the fire and flipping the fish. The spear had become a skewer to help him cook their dinner.

She was in awe of what he was doing. “Have you always lived like this?”

“Pretty much. Been fishing since I was pretty young.” He fidgeted.

Ava realized she was making him a little uncomfortable.

He had a past that had led him to robbing trains. She wondered if she would feel sorry for him if she ever actually heard it.

Ava took a moment to study her hands as the camp fell into silence until Grey removed the fish from the fire. He took his bandana and wrapped his hand in it to pull off one of the fish filets.

He was kind enough to hand the stick with the remaining fish over to Ava. “We don't have any proper silverware.” He shrugged.

“It's fine. I'm just hungry.”

He put the tin can on the fire. He had filled it with water. “Give the drink a few moments.”

“What are you doing?” She tilted her head.

“Boiling the water cleans it. Sometimes you can get sick drinking from streams.” He didn’t seem to be judging her. He was just answering her question.

“Oh, I didn’t know.” She looked down at her fish. She felt like she should have known of this, but she had never seen her water boiled before. “Will this make us sick?”

“It’s been cooked. We’ll be just fine.” He laughed at her. “I’ll bet you’ve only drunk well water, right?”

She felt a little embarrassed by all of her questions. He already had her all figured out.

Ava was curious what he really thought of her and what he hadn’t been willing to say to her. But this wasn’t the time to ask those kinds of questions.

He was being kind and she had to be grateful for that.

“I’m sorry, I just didn’t know.”

“I didn’t expect you to know any of this. That’s why I came to find you.”

“Aren’t your bandit friends going to miss you?”

She needed to remind herself of how she had originally met this man. He was a thief who brandished weapons at people in order to relieve them of their belongings.

“Probably.” He shrugged and turned away to finish his food. It didn’t take him long to shovel every bite of the makeshift meal into his mouth.

He must have been just as hungry as she was, if not more so.

She wondered how often this man had been starving in his life. It had

never been a problem for her before this, but this man had clearly had a much more difficult time.

She must have said the wrong thing. It upset him. Ava hoped he wasn't going to leave her alone for insulting him. Her pain was making her rude.

She knew she was better than this, but it was hard to be nice to anyone right now.

She turned back to her food, trying to think about what she should say to him next. Nothing came to mind, so she carefully tested the fish. It was flaky.

There was no salt or other seasonings on it, but the wood smoke seemed to help flavor the meat. It tasted pretty nice.

While the food was in her mouth she was fine, but the moment she tried to swallow, she was hit with a sharp pain in her side. It was hard to see straight.

The stick in her hand clattered to the hard dirt and she grasped at her side.

Grey turned toward her. His eyes were wide, almost like he was panicking. Ava didn't really feel sorry for him. The man ran with a gang of thieves.

She didn't even try to speak. She bent over, but that just hurt more, and she threw herself back on the ground to hold her bruised ribs.

Everything hurt, and she cried out in agony.

Grey was by her side again in an instant. He leaned down and gingerly started to check her over.

Her remaining sense made her try to push his hands away, but it wasn't any good. She had no strength left.



Everything she tried to do just made her pain a thousand times worse.

**F**ear seized Grey's chest. She must have been worse off than he had originally thought. His mind raced.

She had been walking alright. He had almost thought that she was just stunned, with a few bruises.

But she must have been just pushing through with pure strength of will. There was no way this woman should have made it as far as she already had.

He reached for her. There was something wrong with his new ward, and that was a bad sign in this situation. She tried to push his hands away.

He snapped at her. "I'm trying to help you."

"Stop. I'm fine." Her voice was heavy with pain, the words breathless and barely understandable. "Don't worry about me."

"You're going to have to let me help you." He wanted to curse at her, but he remembered the promise that she had forced him to make.

Ava wanted him to be polite. She wanted him to behave like a gentleman. And according to her, that meant letting her keep suffering.

"I'm fine. Just tired." She started to catch her breath and pull herself back up.

He frowned as he watched her. "You can't even eat."

She shrugged. "It's fine. I dropped the fish anyway."

"I can rinse the dirt off. I just need to know what's wrong with you. If you let me help you, maybe we can get to town a little faster."

That seemed to be the right thing to say. She frowned as she straightened up. At least she didn't stand up or pull away again.

"Just tell me." He gave an exasperated exhale.

"I think I bruised my ribs. It hurts when I breathe. When I tried to swallow, it just made it worse. That's all."

He looked her over carefully. "Do you think maybe your clothes are constricting you?"

"Maybe the corset." She frowned as she admitted it.

He immediately knew what the problem was. He had bruised his ribs before. His life was dangerous and injuries were common.

He couldn't imagine having to deal with those injuries with whalebone digging into his side and constricting his waist.

"We're going to have to loosen that."

"No, that's not going to happen." She shook her head.

"You can't even eat. You need to do this." He frowned. "If you can do it on your own, you should. Otherwise, you're going to have to let me help you."

She looked down at the fish on the ground. "I don't have anything to eat, anyway."

"Let me help you." He felt like he was begging. He had done a few

things to help her, but the things that seemed to cause her the most trouble were strictly off-limits.

She didn't even want him to touch her.

She shoved him away again. "I'll do it."

At least she was admitting that it needed to be done. That was an improvement.

This wasn't an ideal solution, but women like her didn't like it when men like him came around. It wasn't the first time she'd made him feel ashamed of his life.

It was a different kind of shame than the one he felt when train passengers got hurt during a robbery. She made him feel embarrassed that he was born poor and had lost everything in his life.

She made him feel ashamed of the life that had led him to meeting her. Everything about her was so strong and proper.

"You try to loosen your corset and I'll wash off your fish and then get more water."

He reached for the fish, picking it up and quickly dunking it into the boiling water in the tin can.

She grunted and shifted away, turning her back to him.

He made a conscious effort not to look at her while she worked on her clothes.

She was making the most awful noises, grunting and groaning as she fought against the pain and tried to take care of herself. It obviously wasn't going very well for her.

He didn't want to pry, however. She was in a sensitive state.

He remembered the first time he had been all on his own, just after his parents had died. She must have been feeling like that.

Whatever reason she had been on that train, she was now his responsibility.

He knew he couldn't go back to his gang, and trying to help this stubborn city-born princess was proving to be more difficult than he had thought.

Regrets were a staple in his life. Doing the right thing wasn't easy, but maybe he could get a new start in life after he had gotten the beautiful woman to safety.

But that was only if she could get over her own pride and accept him helping her.

There was so much to her story that he just didn't know. She had kept that perfume bottle so close, unwilling to let go of it even under the worst of threats.

Her behavior had been proud and stubborn, pushing on far beyond where someone like her should have gone.

As he listened to her torture herself rather than ask for assistance, he couldn't help but feel bad for the woman. This had to be the most disorienting thing that had ever happened to her.

He couldn't even guess how he would react in a similar situation. Everything would be so strange and foreign.

This was a brand-new way of surviving that had slapped her in the face.

But he also knew that pride came before a fall, and this was going to hurt her if she couldn't figure out when to ask for help and support.

He hoped she wouldn't die due to her arrogance.

He had to remind himself that her inability to know when to quit had been what got her in this situation. He shouldn't feel sorry for her.

She was a person who had tempted fate and somehow survived. Now, she would have to learn right from wrong the hard way. It was a lesson he had struggled with.

She was much older than he had been when he'd lost everything, however. And her situation was likely only temporary.

The truth was that he knew he was always on the edge of total disaster. That was his entire life. He was used to operating on that thin edge between life and loss.

Joy was a fleeting thing that could be taken faster than he managed to build it.

She had probably never known that kind of life. Everything had always been handed to her.

Money made the world work, and if you had it, you could do anything you wanted to do. There were no rules. She had no rules. Now, she had to survive.

She would have died out here if he had left her alone. He might regret the way she treated him, but the right things were never easy. That was what his parents had said.

He had lost his way a time or two in the past. He had made mistakes, but Grey liked to think that he did the right thing when it really mattered.

He would just end up torturing himself if the last thing he saw was her being tossed to the ground with no one to tell her which way to go.

If he was honest with himself, he doubted she would have been able to just follow the tracks without him there to push her and keep her moving.

She certainly wouldn't have been able to get her own food or water.

He wanted to look in her direction and see how she was doing, but it would be inappropriate. Her state of dress was hard to call from this position.

Eventually, she finished struggling and gave a frustrated grunt. "I need help."

Grey didn't make her ask again. He rushed over to help her loosen the laces of that corset.

"Don't get any ideas," she grumped at him, but there was a slight blush on her cheeks. He couldn't help but notice as he slowly worked the laces of her corset.

She hindered his movement a little by trying to make sure that she stayed fully covered. He didn't complain about that. He was helping, not trying to seduce her.

Ava hadn't been able to do much other than slip her dress off enough to reveal the corset. She clearly couldn't reach the actual laces.

He worked slowly. "Let me know if it hurts you."

She grunted. "I know it's going to hurt. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" He tilted his head. His motions became more ginger, trying not to cause her to move any more than he had to.

"Yes, just get it done. I need to be able to breathe again."

Ava was definitely in a bad mood. He couldn't blame her for that.

Figuring out what to say to Ava was hard sometimes. Well, if he was honest with himself, she was difficult to speak to most of the time.

He knew what Ava thought of him. She was beautiful, he couldn't

deny that, but he wasn't a monster. He wouldn't seduce a woman who wanted nothing to do with him.

Grey honestly just wanted to help her. No matter how attractive she was, the woman was in a difficult place.

He tried to show it through his actions, but he didn't know if she picked up on it. He didn't touch more than he had to, loosening the strings and slowly working his way down.

As he worked, he noticed that she seemed to be breathing easier.

He finished and scooted back away from her. "Are you feeling any better?"

She nodded, but didn't say much after that. He understood. Everything was still so strained that continuing conversations felt awkward.

Grey went and got back to work on their small camp. There wasn't much there, but he could find a way to stay busy. There was always something that could be done.

He had a lot to think about while he walked the perimeter. They had trampled down the grass in a circle around the fire, giving them some space to stretch out.

Ava was laying down by the time he glanced back in her direction. He went to a spot on the other side of the fire. There would be no risk of them touching in their sleep.

He faced away from the fire and away from Ava. He didn't want her to see the loneliness that filled him as the air quieted to just the soft sounds of wildlife around them.

He had lost everything to save her and she still hated him for it.



Ava stared at the river in front of her and bit her lip.

She couldn't help but feel worried about it. It had been three days. Her rib was starting to feel better, but she still didn't feel as steady as she did before the injury.

She wasn't sure if she was going to make it.

Ava glanced over at her companion. Grey had been gentle enough. He had been kind. He hadn't pushed. He hadn't asked for anything from her in return for his kindness.

But he was still a thief, a man who made his way in the world by taking things that didn't belong to him.

She had no idea how she was going to deal with this when she got back to town.

She had spent three days snapping at his kindness and pondering whether she would be able to turn him into the authorities when they got to wherever they were going.

It would be the right thing to do, she knew that, but he also hadn't been anything but a gentleman towards her. He had done something that he didn't have to do.

He could have left her to suffer in the wilderness with no idea where she should go.

Her life had never been this hard — not in this way, at least. She frowned as she considered the river in front of her.

Grey looked over at her. “We have to cross.”

“Is there a better way?”

He shook his head. “It would take several days to find a better spot.”

She pointed. “What about the tracks? There’s probably a bridge somewhere that they go over.”

“Sure, about a day that way.” Grey pointed. “It would take too long.”

She crossed her arms. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean we would add at least two days to the trip, maybe more. The tracks go through some hills that can be difficult to cross.”

“Hills? There’s not a problem with hills.” She shook her head.

“Not these hills.” He sighed. “These are tough to handle if you’re in the best shape.”

“Fine, you’re probably right.” She was a little grumpy about admitting it, though.

He held a hand out toward her. “I can help you.”

She bit her lip, pondering what to say. She knew she would probably need help, but she certainly didn’t want to admit that she needed anything from Grey.

He seemed to be watching her, waiting for her to take his hand.

She shook her head. “I don’t need your help.”

He had a sharp look in his eyes, one of those looks that told her that

he felt she was being stubborn. It might have been her reading into it.

She looked down at her feet, trying to decide if her pride was worth it. She was probably going to need the help. Should she even bother trying on her own?

She shook her head.

Grey gave an exasperated sigh, but he didn't make a move to stop her. "Let me take the lead, then. Follow in my footsteps as well as you can."

Ava was grateful for that. She wasn't sure how to ford a river. It had never come up before. Her life had been easy. She knew that.

Compared to Grey, who'd never had much of a choice in the way his life had turned out, she had been a lucky woman, with all the gifts the world could offer her.

In the past, she would have just looked at him with pity in her eyes, but here, he was the leader. He was a king of this land, able to survive and do things she'd never thought she would have to do.

Her father's money had no meaning here. Her ambitions meant nothing. She could barely keep herself out of pain when she found some herbs on the side of the path.

She could have asked him for some help finding more, but asking for help just felt like it was too much. She had already asked him for far more than she wanted to admit.

She had to prove she was worthy of being saved, somehow.

She nodded and he started to cross the river.

She was a few steps behind him, leaving space in case one of them fell, but not so much that they couldn't reach each other in a hurry.

It was hard to judge, but she hoped she was doing it right.

Grey didn't turn around, but he did keep one arm reached slightly behind him. Ava wondered if it was so she could grab on if she slipped.

She got about halfway across and the river seemed to swirl around her, whipping her dress around in the waves and making it harder to walk.

Ava set her jaw and kept moving forward; she had to fight through this.

But the skirts just tangled up around her, and she ended up tripping over them and slamming down onto the bottom of the river.

Grey snapped back around and reached to pull her above the water.

Ava was in a near panic. She didn't want Grey to put his hands on her. She kicked out, trying to push away from him.

Grey frowned and put her down on her feet. "Would you stop it?"

She didn't say anything, just pushed through to the other side of the river. He followed her, making sure she didn't fall again until she was seated on the riverbank.

She frowned, shifting her skirts to check her knee. The injury still stung, making her feel very uncomfortable. But Grey was right there.

She cleared her throat. "Do you mind?"

"What?"

"Turn around."

He rolled his eyes and turned around. "Wouldn't have happened if you weren't so stubborn about everything."

“I wouldn’t have to be stubborn if you weren’t a thief.”

She could feel how much she’d hurt him with that line. The anger was rolling off him in waves. Grey didn’t say anything, he didn’t have to.

She could tell exactly how he felt about her without a single word or even him looking at her direction. She could tell it by the way his shoulders stiffened.

It was obvious in his legs, which seemed to flex and shift his weight from one side to the other, as if getting ready for a fight.

Ava knew she should be terrified. She should have been too terrified to mouth off to him, but she knew he wouldn’t hurt her. He would keep her safe. He had kept her safe.

She regarded her knee. There was a bloody scrape across the flesh of her joint.

It didn’t hurt as badly until she looked at the damage that was done. Then, she hissed when the air hit the wound like a knife was jammed into it.

Grey started and turned around. “What is it?”

“Get me some pine tar,” she grumbled at him.

“What?” He straightened up and started to look around them.

She said it slowly this time, hoping he would understand. “Pine tar.”

“Why do you want that?”

“Because it’ll keep it from getting infected,” she snapped. “Would you just go get it for me?”

“Uh, sure.” He frowned and walked off into the plains.

She was left alone with her thoughts, pondering on the journey they had taken so far. Every day, she had felt like she couldn't push any further, then she managed to find the strength to continue.

She had to keep telling herself that it was only a week until they would be able to separate and get on with their lives.

Once she got into town, she would try to find a way to send a telegram home to her father. He would send the money for her to continue wherever her journey was taking her.

This was a delay in meeting her husband, not something she particularly regretted.

A thought hit her. This delay could be her last hurrah of freedom. She could do things she never thought possible and take this adventure with her for the rest of her life.

Grey would never understand what kind of life she would go back to after all of this. It seemed so foreign to him to think about.

There was no way he would ever truly grasp how hard life was for a woman like her, a woman with ambition and a hope beyond a home and family.

He wouldn't understand that she had bad parts in her past and future, like he did.

He came jogging back with a small piece of cloth torn from his shirt, the requested tar on the swatch.

She took it from him. "Thank you."

"What's that for?" Grey pointed at the cloth that had been passed into her hands.

She looked down at it before scraping some off with a finger and placing it on her wound. "What? Oh, well, it helps heal the wound."

“It does?” He looked surprised.

She nodded. “It also prevents infection.”

“That’s a good thing, where did you learn stuff like that?” He tilted his head.

He seemed honestly curious, but for some reason, Ava felt offended by his question. She hissed as the crude paste settled into the crevices of her wound.

The wound care might have been the reason she snapped at him, but she didn’t care to be polite.

“Maybe I just got some education. Or maybe I’m not as useless as you think I am.”

“I didn’t say you were useless.”

“You didn’t have to.” She snorted and looked down at her wound.

She regretted having said it. Grey just seemed to bring out all the frustration she held deep inside.

It was wrong to take all of this out on him, but it just happened whenever he came around. He deserved better, but she didn’t apologize.

It was a foolish thing, this inability to speak to him with the kindness he deserved, but his abilities made her feel terrible about her own inability to care for himself.

**G**rey knew she could be nice when she wanted to be. She had proven that over and over again.

But the second he did something he didn't even realize was wrong, she flared up like a raging flame of hatred.

She was also absolutely exhausting. Dealing with her ensured he could never know what to expect. He hated that.

She did this to him, made him feel like he was entirely off his guard.

One moment, she would be laughing and joking, and then he would offer to help with something she was clearly struggling with and she would snap at him and turn away.

No longer was she well put together. Her skirts were covered in dust and worn from the road, or lack thereof. There hadn't been much of a road so far.

They had been walking through the plains on smaller trails. He had been wanting to avoid any interaction with his gang or lawmen.

This was a shortcut to town, and if they just kept going, they would make it.

He had to keep reminding himself that they were well over halfway there. They had been on the road for five days now. The trip would be over soon.



He had to keep her moving, so he couldn't show his exhaustion.

He'd been missing a lot of sleep lately because she was struggling so much. She tossed and turned on the ground, struggling to stay comfortable and warm.

It caused her to grunt and groan. She hadn't complained about it, but it had kept him up at night. Still, he didn't push her for information.

It was clear she hated showing him weakness. When her eyes settled on him, they judged him for every part of his life. She didn't understand what it was like to be desperate.

Someone always came along to save her. Even in this, the hardest moment of her life, he had been there. She would always feel safe.

He turned to her. "Do you need to take a break?"

The truth was, he needed to take a break.

She nodded and sat down before she could respond. He sat down next to her.

She glanced around. "Do we have any water left?"

Grey shook his head. "I'll have to collect dew tonight. The tin can is already empty from the last small pond we went to."

She cursed lightly under her breath.

"That was ladylike." He laughed.

Ava could have a sense of humor when she wasn't snapping at him. "I learned it from you."

"I don't believe I've cursed around you."

"You have a time or two."

Grey smirked. "I tried not to, at least." He shrugged.

She was laughing. "I know you did."

"It was your rules. You set them up. I just tried to follow them."

She leaned closer to him.

His heart fluttered as he watched her. She was actually trying to get closer.

There had to be something behind that. Maybe he was reading too much into it, but it was very possible that she was actually starting to trust him.

It meant so much to him, the trust she felt for his kindness. He had been hoping that one day on this trip he would be able to earn her respect.

Not that he had done much in his life to deserve it, other than this. He had always just let Bart do his thing.

This was the first time that he had ever really broken the trust that the gang had put into him. He had never abandoned them before, not for one of their victims.

He'd tried to change things, but it didn't work that way. Change didn't happen over the course of a few days of sharing company.

This woman deserved better than to spend a week walking through the wilderness in the hopes of getting to town. They had nothing, surviving on only what they could find and use before leaving the campsite behind because they had to keep on the path.

He looked at her carefully, both of them silent for a long moment.

He wondered if she thought about him the same way he thought about her. There was no way to tell if she thought he was a good man

underneath the veneer of a bandit that he still carried.

He knew everything about his life frightened someone who came from a past like Ava's.

He wondered if anyone else would have been able to help her. The people on the train didn't come to help her while they were on that train, but they had made the effort to stop Bart and himself from pursuing her.

They hadn't been successful, though. And it had left them there.

He looked around. "We shouldn't rest for too long." The clouds were starting to turn dark.

"Can't we sit just a little longer?"

"There may be a storm coming. We should try to get under the trees before it comes."

"Rain?"

He groaned internally. She seemed so surprised by everything that happened, perfectly ordinary things that happened every single day. It didn't make any sense to him.

She squinted up at the sky. "It's starting to get dark, it can't be that late, can it?"

"It's not late, no. That's the storm coming."

She picked herself up. He could see she was still having a little trouble because of the bruises on her side.

She didn't want his help, though — that had already been well established.

He carefully rose to his feet. He was still very tired. It was hard to

keep going, but he made himself do it.

They started to walk across the plains. It would take some time to get to the shelter of the treeline. He hoped they would make it under the cover before the rain started.

He tried to rush her along, but she was tired, too. If he was exhausted, she must have been feeling so much worse.

This was a rough trip even for someone accustomed to it.

She kept getting hurt, damaged by their journey. He knew it wasn't his fault.

People got hurt when they traveled in the wilderness, and some scrapes and bruises were bound to happen, but he still felt like he was failing at the job he had taken on. He was supposed to be protecting her.

"Can you move a little faster?" he asked, hoping to get her moving without starting a fight.

"I'm trying." Her voice had the edge of whining underneath the frustration, just a long, drawn-out, high-pitched grumble at the end of her words.

The rest of the sounds were deeper, less whiny. It was just another hint at how miserable she was.

Ava somehow kept moving; her will was tremendous.

She didn't speed up much, but he was grateful for the little bit that she could do in that aspect.

Luck was not on their side. The rain opened up before they were even halfway there.

And it was no small trickle; instead, it was like the sky let loose its

wrath above them, rolling thunder echoing through the air and sheets of rain hitting them hard.

She shivered. Grey tried to pull her close, but she resisted.

“We have to get to shelter,” she called out.

That was the most obvious statement that he had ever heard. He fought the urge to roll his eyes. “I know. Keep moving.”

The mud formed at their feet. Grey felt himself starting to slip and stumble, the rain making it difficult to see.

Ava seemed to be having a worse time than he was. She tripped and splashed mud up around herself. Her skirts were getting weighed down.

If this was a different circumstance with a more reasonable woman, he would suggest that she lose some of her underskirts, but he knew Ava wouldn't take that suggestion well.

He sighed, pushing through as their feet started to dig deeper with every step.

Every time he lifted up his foot, he felt the muddy ground clinging to his boot, threatening to pull it off. He shivered. It was freezing cold.

The rain wasn't going to let this be easy on them.

If it wasn't one thing, it was something else. Always something to make this feel like it was all one mistake after another.

Ava slipped with one leg and her other leg stuck in the mud. It almost made her fall on her face as she started to drop into the splits.

Grey tried to rush to help her up, but he was getting stuck himself.

“I hate this rain.” Ava was full-on whining now.

"I know, but I can't make it stop," Grey snapped at her. "We just need to get to the trees."

"Does it always rain like this? Why does anyone live here?"

"Not always, and because they want to or because they have no choice." Grey sighed heavily.

Ava didn't look amused by his response. He had been trying to make a joke, but apparently it hadn't landed well.

He started to move against the pouring rain, holding his arm in front of her face. "Keep going. You just have to keep going."

"I'm trying," she grunted. "I can't see anything through this rain." She was shouting against the wind.

"Just take my hand."

"Where's your hand?" She reached for him, fumbling. "I can't even keep my eyes open. I can't see anything."

She was now in full-fledged complaining mode, her arms crossed over her chest.

She had stopped moving, standing there with the rain streaming down her face. Her lips were pursed and she just glared at him.

He stopped and turned to look at her, coming face to face with her angry eyes. He didn't have time for this. "What are you doing?"

"I can't get to those trees. I can't even move." Her shoulders squared. She looked like she was ready to fight.

"What am I supposed to do about it? I would sink waist deep in the mud if I tried to carry you there."

"There's nothing that can be done."

Grey put his hands on his hips. "You aren't going to get there if you don't do any moving."

"I can't move right now. This mud is in my shoes. I can barely take a step and I can't see anything." She was staying stubborn in her complaints.

Grey sighed and rolled his eyes. They didn't need her whining right then.

They needed to keep struggling through until they could get under the trees and get to some semblance of dry land.

"Fine." He whipped his hat off his head and shoved it onto hers. "Can we get moving now?"

She blinked at him, fumbling for words and spluttering in the rain. "Uh..."

"After you." He waved toward the trees. The words that came out of his mouth were bitter and cold. "I'd like to get out of the icy rain at some point."

She grunted and started moving once again, pushing herself forward one step at a time. "How does anyone do this?"

"Just like we're doing it." Grey squinted. It was harder to see without the hat on his head, but he could see Ava wearing a muddy dress and a hat that was far too big for her.

It made him smile. They both must have looked absolutely ridiculous.

"What are you smiling about?" she grumped at him.

"I'm pretty sure we both look like we've been run through the wringer."

"You look like you were playing in a pigsty." She snickered as they

pushed forward.

It had been so quiet, he wasn't sure that he'd heard her small laugh. But her smile said everything he needed to know. She found it just as funny as he did.

They were both in better moods as they made their way to the treeline. It took a long time, but they did manage to get there.

By the time they had gotten to relative safety, they were both covered in mud and soaking wet.

He knew what they had to do next. They had to try to dry off. If either of them got sick from the cold and wet, it would put the rest of the trip at risk.

Returning a dead woman to her family wasn't ideal if he didn't want to end up in jail.

She looked like she was ready to drop.

"I hate to say this to you, but we're not done yet." He tried not to look like he was about to fall over from exhaustion.

She frowned. "What?"

"We need to light a fire."

"A fire, right. Getting warm would be wonderful." She nodded.

She still looked slightly dazed as she started to hunt for any firewood she could find. He was only moving through sheer force of will, himself.

But they would make it through this somehow. He had to keep hope.



**G**rey could hear Ava grumbling as she hunted for wood. Her moods seemed to change like the weather.

He sighed, knowing she wasn't going to be a lot of help in getting the fire started. She was too grumpy and tired.

It frustrated him to have to deal with her. He had made a promise, and he knew what he had given up to help her.

He just wanted her not to treat him like he was a monster for doing so.

And he still blamed himself for her being in the situation she was in. He had hesitated. If he had just grabbed the item from her and left, she would still be on the train.

He didn't want to go back to the camp. He hoped that giving her time to get out of her mood would save him from her wrath, but it seemed to be taking forever.

On top of that, dry wood was hard to find. Only a few pieces he'd found would work, along with a few only slightly wet larger branches that might dry if he could manage to start the fire.

Eventually, he had to head back.

The only pieces Ava had piled up were soaking wet. She probably didn't know how to find dry wood.

He made a mental promise to stay calm. “Let’s see if we can get the fire started, alright?”

She stood there, arms crossed. “Yes, let’s do that.” The answer was so curt, he was certain the shiver that shot down his spine wasn’t caused by his wet clothes.

He sat down and piled up his sticks and started trying to light his wood.

“Aren’t you going to use the wood I found?” she snapped at him.

“That’s too wet.” He fought to keep his voice as neutral as possible. “We’ll have to start the fire first and set it on the flames to dry off, then catch.”

She huffed. “I’m sorry I can’t do anything right.”

He snapped. This had to end. She couldn’t keep talking to him like this. “Look, princess. I understand that I’m below your station.”

His words were sarcastic. “But that doesn’t mean you can treat me like one of your servants. I’m here doing you a favor.”

She seemed taken aback and didn’t respond.

He didn’t relent. He had a lot to get off his chest. “I know you were traveling alone, but you can’t even take care of yourself. You should have brought your servants.

“I gave up everything to try to save you and you don’t even care. I can’t go back to my gang. I’ve tried to be patient with you, highness, but you’ve made that difficult.

He smirked. “I assume because you make *everything* difficult.”

Grey was ready to continue, but she started to snifle.

He instantly felt bad about making her cry, but he still had more to say. His voice softened when he said it, though.

“Look, I know that this isn’t easy, but half the time you make me wish I had just left you there on your own. You make me regret everything I’ve done for you.”

Glaring angrily, she snapped, “I’m not some spoiled lady. I have servants, but my life isn’t all roses. It’s hard to deal with every day.

“I have dreams, but my family is still sending me to marry some guy I barely know. I don’t want to go. I tried to learn a trade instead. I wanted to work.”

He was stunned. He couldn’t believe it.

It was her turn to continue her angry rant at him. “I never even wanted to be on that train. I didn’t have a choice. And your gang took every dream I had left from me.

“I can’t even have that perfume bottle back. There’s no way it’ll ever be found. Your gang are monsters. You should be glad that you’ve left.

“You’ve got a chance at something new. I’m still going to have to go back and start my life with the son of one of my father’s business partners.”

He blinked at her.

She was getting louder; her voice rang through the forest.

“It’s not the life I wanted, but after all of this is over, I’m going to have to go back to it. You have the choice to do something new.”

She stormed away from him, ignoring him when he tried to call out to her.

He plopped down in the mud. This fire wasn’t going to light itself, but

he didn't really have the focus to spark the flames. He had his gang on his mind.

He knew what it was like to feel like he had no choice. There had never been anything better out there for him.

She was trying to take credit for getting him out of that life, but he knew the truth. He probably wouldn't have anything new out of his life.

He would have to find another gang once he dropped her off. There weren't many jobs to be had, even if he had training and experience in honest work.

This was the West, where lives could be destroyed with the drop of a hat. And he had suffered through that.

He had no choice but to fall into any work that would keep food in his stomach and a warm fire going at night.

Bart had become his father when Grey had lost his own. The man had stepped up and given Grey food to eat and a safe place to live. He had always been grateful for that.

But it had stuck him in that life with no choices.

Lies built up on lies and crimes built up on crimes. There was no getting out from under the avalanche of repercussions if he got caught.

Bart had told him stories about prison, teaching him to fear what would happen if he ever got caught. The other gang members had done the same to him.

Ava had a similar life, but with a golden tint to it. He tried to remember the metaphor; he had heard about it before he had left school, but it wasn't coming to him.

It was something about different cages still being a cage, but some cages were prettier than others.

He sighed. He was going to have to try to talk to her.

He just had to figure out how.

**A**va plopped down next to a cedar tree. She could tell what it was from the scent.

She used to put cedar sap into small containers that she would leave open to let the fragrance permeate her room. It was one of her favorite smells.

But she couldn't think about that too much. Instead, she was just trying not to cry. What Grey had said to her had hurt.

Tears kept threatening to roll down her cheeks. The rain wouldn't hide her sobs, and she wasn't sure she would be able to stop crying if she started.

There were no other options. Running away wouldn't work because it had already been proven to her that she couldn't make it on her own.

She needed someone like Grey to take care of her.

There was always someone to take care of her. She couldn't learn to live on her own because she simply wasn't capable of doing that kind of work.

Ava put her head in her hands. She wasn't crying, but she was definitely close to losing it and just exploding in wracking upset.

She felt someone sit down next to her.

Ava didn't have to look up. The only person it could be was Grey.

He spoke, but she didn't hear what he said over the storm. She didn't care to ask, either. Instead, she ignored the fact that he was even there.

She didn't want to talk to him. She didn't want to hear what he had to say.

He was a problem that she couldn't solve, because there was no way to get away from him until she managed to get to town and try to talk her way into getting a message back to her father.

This freedom would be very short-lived. She knew it.

She kept her head in her hands, trying to fight back tears.

Grey said nothing, just sat next to her. It was a slightly comforting presence, even if she didn't want to admit it.

She still couldn't hear the soft words he was speaking. No matter how bad she felt, the curiosity was still there. She wanted to know more about him.

There had to be a reason he had been showing her nothing but kindness until she'd pushed him to the point where he'd snapped.

She sniffled. Ava still hadn't cried, but she was close. Her head raised up from her hands. "What?"

"Huh?" He was facing her. He had been talking quietly.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you." She sniffed again.

He cleared his throat and shifted awkwardly. "I had no idea, I'm sorry."

She nodded. "I don't think I really like talking about it. I wanted to

study perfume-making, but my father married me off instead.”

“You wanted to work?”

She nodded. “I’d rather work than marry. I wanted that life. But I never got the chance to live it.”

He reached out, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“There’s nothing you can do about it.” She started to cry over her situation. Her face fell onto his shoulder.

He just let her tears fall down her cheeks. He didn’t bother to stop her or try to make her feel better. She sobbed loudly, trying to speak.

She didn’t deserve his help. She knew it. He had had a difficult life, probably more difficult than her own. She had just been whining about her problems.

The truth was, she had never had to worry about where she was going to get her next meal, not before she had been stuck here in the middle of nowhere.

This was a life that made her feel badly for everything that had bothered her. How could things be right if there were people that had so few options out there?

People lived by what they found in the woods or in the streams.

She had never pictured having to live like this. It had never seemed to be possible.

It took her a while to get things put together. She knew she was a complete mess, and this man was just trying to do what was right.

She blubbered as she tried to find the right things to say. “I’m sorry.”



He nudged her with his shoulder while he held her. "Don't worry about it. We both have things to be sorry for."

"I can't believe this happened to me."

"It's not your fault."

"It is my fault. I should have just handed it over. Now I've lost it and I'm stuck out here in the middle of the plains and there's nothing I can do about it."

"I don't even know how I'm going to get home after all of this," she lamented.

"You're going to be fine. I'll make sure you're taken care of," Grey promised her.

"I don't know how we're going to do that. Neither of us has any money. Telegrams cost money." She shook her head.

"We'll figure it out. Maybe I can take a couple odd jobs and make the money for a telegram. That is, if you actually want to go to California."

"I don't have any choice."

"If you want a choice, maybe we can make sure you have one."

His arms were still around her. They made her feel safe and totally secure. Grey was a good man who honestly cared.

She had been a monster to him and it had caused nothing but trouble. She had seen that kind of trouble before.

She looked up at him. His dirty blond hair was matted from the rain. She was sure that her own hair was matted just as much.

They were both a complete mess; the rain and mud and journey

without clean clothes or a bath had taken its toll.

Her dress was ripped, not just the first rip that she'd gotten on her dress, but the trip had done a lot of damage to her clothes. Her luggage was back on the train.

Maybe it would be dropped off at the station, but she didn't know for sure. How would they even know to look for her? She had a ticket and a sleeper car.

And there had been witnesses, but that wasn't a guarantee.

If the bags weren't there, she would be in town with nothing. She struggled to find the right things to say.

Grey let her sit in silence, giving her space to worry.

She picked her head up and looked into his eyes. They were tired, drawn, but there was care there. The man was so kind.

She didn't know that anyone was capable of being as kind as this bandit was.

She sniffled again, wiping her nose on her soaking wet sleeve. "What are you going to do?"

Grey was mimicking her motions slightly, just the little shifting of weight or hand movements that made up her body language.

She found it sort of comforting when he moved his left hand at the same moment she moved her right, like there was a sort of connection between them that she couldn't really explain. She wondered if he was doing it on purpose.

"I don't know, yet."

"Haven't you thought about it?"

“I’m not sure there’s much to think about. I’ll just have to figure that out when it comes. I can survive in the wilderness.

“I might go to another city and try to get a fresh start there, but I’m not sure yet. I’m just trying to deal with one thing at a time.”

He was trying to make her feel better, lying to make her think he would clean his life up, but he knew the truth.

It would be nearly impossible for him to have that kind of life with his background.

She nodded. “One step at a time.”

“Exactly. I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.”

She smiled softly. “That makes sense.”

They shared a moment. Their eyes were locked together, sharing feelings neither of them knew how to verbalize.

It didn’t feel awkward at all, but Ava was aware it should have been awkward. She was feeling a rush, feelings she’d never expected to feel with anyone ever.

There was no denying that Grey was an attractive man. She knew it. She had known it from the first moment she had seen those steel-grey eyes.

He brushed her auburn hair back from her forehead and her breath caught in her throat. She hadn’t realized how much she didn’t want this trip to end until then.

He swallowed so hard she could hear it. “Look, I’m sorry to say this — it’s probably just going to make it more difficult — but you don’t have to go to California.”

She pursed her lips, considering what he had to say. “What else would

I do?I can't just run away."

Grey glanced up at the sky. The rain was still coming down hard so it dripped between the branches and onto his face. "I don't know yet, but we'll figure it out."

Then, his eyes dropped back down to capture hers again.

She liked the way he looked with the water running down his face. "We?"

"I don't really know why I said that, but I'll help if I can." He shrugged.

"I don't think I can just run away. I don't know if I could ever break my parents' hearts like that. I'm miserable, but this is what they expect of me." She shook her head.

He sighed. "I know, it's never easy. It always feels like you don't have a choice. People need other people. When you find them, you don't want to let them down.

"I feel that way with the gang. It's why I was robbing trains. I never wanted to, but the gang was my family."

She nodded slowly, debating internally about the proper response to what he was saying. One didn't come to mind easily, so she went for just a slight head motion, hoping he would accept it.

Her plan seemed to have worked. He homed in on what she would have said if she had been able to figure out what to say at that moment.

"You have to feel the same way, but with your actual family."

"They helped you after your parents died, didn't they?"

Grey nodded. "They found me when I was nine years old and took

care of me as a child.” It was a tough explanation to hear. He looked down at his feet.

“They were the only people that would take me in. I didn’t have any other choice. Bart taught me to take care of myself.”

Grey looked away, breaking the spell.

She bit her tongue before she said something foolish. “It must hurt. I’m so sorry that happened to you. Do you have any family left?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Not that I ever knew of. I never met any family, at least. There wasn’t an orphanage, either. The town was too small.

“I didn’t have anyone to take care of me. The gang found me.”

She nodded. “You love them, don’t you?”

“They’re my family.”

“They can still be your family.”

The bandit shook his head. “I abandoned them. They’ll never think of me as family again.”

It broke her heart to hear that. “You gave that up for me?”

“It was the right thing to do.”

“Thank you. I had no idea. I just don’t know what to say. I’ve been so terrible to you, I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t have to do that.” He shook his head.

She picked at the hem of her skirt. The conversation died into strained silence. They had learned a lot about each other and it felt a little weird to know these things.

They were on the edge of being friends.

But it couldn't be anything more. She knew that. And she was pretty sure Grey understood that, as well.

They had come from two different worlds, in spite of their similar feelings. What mattered was that they were both going to different places.

She frowned to herself. When she talked to her father, she wanted to make sure that Grey had a new chance at life.

She wondered if there was a way to make that happen.

She would have to lie to her father and forget to mention that he was one of the bandits, but that was an easy fact to forget.

Grey deserved a better life. She might have it in her power to give him that. She could try, at least. Maybe a reward?

She might be able to arrange that if she played her cards right. Her father would forget to suggest something like that on his own, but she had to push for it if she could.

Especially if she was back en route to meet the man her father had chosen for her, he would appreciate that. It would make Grey's life easier.

She chewed on her lip. She would be making his life easier. And it would make her wedding worth it. It would have led to someone's life getting better, even if it wasn't hers.

Ava wouldn't tell him, not until she knew for sure she could make it happen.

Grey got up off the ground. "I should go try to get that fire going again. Do you want to come sit by me?"

“Sure.” She fidgeted, then got to her feet. She wanted to say something to Grey, but couldn’t figure out the right response.

She decided to just sit back and let him work while she pondered exactly what to say.

Ava hugged her knees. She didn't talk a lot while Grey was getting the fire going. She had tried to help, but she didn't have the expertise he did.

He knew what he was doing and eventually had flames catching some of the pieces. It wasn't a large roaring fire by any means, but it did throw off a little bit of warmth.

The smoke, however, was thick and gray. She gathered a few more pieces of wet wood and Grey leaned them over the fire.

"They should dry out."

Ava chewed on the inside of her cheek. This was embarrassing. "You said that before. I guess I never thought about it."

"Wet wood? You never thought about wet wood?" Grey tilted his head.

She shrugged. "We always had dry wood stacked up. I have a lot to learn, I suppose."

It was such an easy conversation. Grey was teaching her about this world. She hadn't really lit fires back home; her maids had taken care of most of that.

Even thinking about being inside a building made her miss what it was like to sleep out of the elements. She understood what it must



have been like to have died from exposure.

Weather wasn't bad when you had a place to retreat to, but the constant sun and damp and dew and rain just felt like it was never-ending.

Grey took a moment to warm his hands as she scooted up next to him. "Do you think it'll last the night?"

"I'll have to go and get more wood to dry out before we settle in. Maybe grab some branches so we're not just sleeping in the mud."

She nodded. She had no idea what he would do with those branches, but didn't want to admit more ignorance. He would probably explain it to her, anyway.

"Right, do you need some help?"

"Take a minute to get warm first." He shook his head.

"Oh, I plan on it." Ava laughed softly. "I've been freezing for hours."

"It hasn't been an hour yet. We won't be able to move again until morning. We had to stop a little early, but it's not like we can keep pushing on." Grey shrugged.

"Does it mean we're going to have to take an extra day on the road?"

"I hope that we don't, but it's possible."

She was honestly a little disappointed. It would have been so nice if the trip took a lot longer. That would give her more freedom and the ability to get to know Grey.

He seemed like a nice man with a good heart who had been pulled into a life he couldn't control.

She wondered about a few things, though; there were questions on her

mind. She just had to find the right way to lead into them.

“Well, let’s go find that wood.”

It would give her some more time to think. She started to get up.

Grey seemed to be moving a lot faster. He got up and gathered wood, bringing twice as much as she managed to get piled up in the same time.

“You got a good haul.”

“I didn’t get that much.”

“Don’t blame yourself for that, I’ve just got more practice. You’re doing pretty good for someone with no experience.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, would do you good if you would accept more help. You might learn this stuff a little faster.” He winked.

She laughed about that. She had been very stubborn lately. It was hard to accept help, and his criticism was well-earned.

It was a little awkward to laugh about it, but there was something about the way he said it that made her feel like it wasn’t an attack.

Grey was gentle about his words, not soft, but rather comfortable and confident. He was breathtaking when he started that easy laugh.

She was starting to see stars around her companion, and her curiosity was piqued. She had more questions for him. Ava softly cleared her throat.

Grey looked up at her. “Did you need something?”

She started to panic at the thought of actually verbalizing her

thoughts and shook her head. "Sorry, just a cough."

"Do you have a fever?" He walked over to her and put the back of his hand against her forehead.

"I don't think so."

He frowned. "You could be getting sick. You've been outside for days now and I know you're not used to it."

"I don't think I am." She shook her head. "And if I was, it wouldn't matter. We would still have to get back to town. That's not what it was."

"Then what was it?"

"Nothing, I'm just tired." She settled onto the ground next to the fire. "We should try to get some sleep."

"Wait a second."

Grey walked over and pulled over some branches that were covered in leaves. He put them on the ground on either side of the fire.

"That should make you a little more comfortable, and you won't get as muddy trying to sleep."

She smiled and settled onto the makeshift bed.

He made his own bed and climbed onto it.

The silence of the night stretched on.

Ava wasn't looking at Grey, but she could hear him occasionally sigh and turn in the night. It didn't sound like sleep, but rather the tossing and turning of a man troubled by something.

She let it go on, just listening and pretending to be asleep. Then, he

started to murmur softly. She couldn't understand what he was saying.

Ava worried about whether or not to ask what was bothering him. He had his troubles. She knew about most of them.

Eventually, she decided to roll over and look at him.

Grey was laying there, staring into the fire, a forlorn look on his face. Ava knew what he was saddened by.

He had lost so much, and she owed him for what he had done.

She drew in a steady breath and spoke up. "Do you want to talk some more?"

Grey didn't speak. He just gave a barely perceptible shake of his head.

"I'm here if you want to talk to someone."

"I know." His voice was almost lost in the sound of the fire. "But I can't talk about it right now."

She frowned. He had a broken heart. She had an urge to do something to fix it, but she was sure there wasn't anything she could do about it.

This man was having a moment and he needed help.

"Are you sure?"

His eyes snapped from the fire to her and then back to the fire. "You don't have to do this for me. I'll be fine. I've just got some stuff on my mind."

He was talking in a low, controlled voice, like he was afraid of completely losing it.

It broke her heart to hear it. She wanted to get up and go over to him, but it wasn't her place to do so.

His problems were so profound, she couldn't figure out the right thing to do.

"I'm sorry," she whispered at him.

"You don't have anything to be sorry for."

"I can be sorry because you're hurting."

"I'm not hurting." He shook his head at her.

She sighed. He was just going to deny this over and over again. There was no way to help him if he kept denying it. Not that she was sure she could do anything, anyway.

She moved, almost reaching out to him, before she shifted to put her arm back under her head. Reaching out to him would just confuse their relationship even more.

She was feeling the confusion. Maybe he didn't feel it, but she wasn't sure how she felt about him. Grey could get under her skin in a way she had never expected.

It was sad that they were from two completely different worlds and would never talk after this journey was over. Grey was a good man.

She knew he would make something out of his life. He had the ability to smooth tensions and work hard. He could survive by himself in the wild. He was caring.

There had to be some sort of profession that would benefit from those traits.

If had been born to a wealthier life, he might have even been a doctor. But he could still be a rancher. She wondered if he was good with animals, too.

It would make sense if he was.

He was looking at the fire and she was looking at him, studying the contours of his face. His expression relaxed, a slight frown tugging down the corners of his lips.

His eyes were half-lidded, probably because of the brightness of the flames. There were dark circles where his cheeks met his eye sockets, making him look drawn and sickly.

She found it a little hard to regard much more of his face. The flames were growing brighter, crackling.

“Is the smoke getting to you?” She tried to ask him questions again, starting a different way this time.

He just shook his head and didn’t say anything. She gave up.

The fire threw up a lot of smoke, covering her view of the gray clouds. She was going to miss views of the sky when she was sleeping inside again.

Maybe she would sleep out on balconies or the roof when she got to whatever house her arranged husband would have for her in California.

It might even be nice, reminding her of a time when everything was going wrong, but she was as free as she had ever been in her entire life.

She smiled softly as she thought about.

It must have caught Grey’s attention because his eyes flickered from the fire and up to her face. “You look happy.”

“Just enjoying the freedom.” Her thoughts had moved over so many subjects in the span of less than a minute. That gave her some perspective.

“I think I’ll miss this once it’s all over,” she admitted.

“You could just not go back to whatever your family wants,” he suggested again.

“I wouldn’t know what to do or where to go if I did that.”

“What about studying perfuming?”

“I’ve got no money to start that.” She shook her head. “Maybe something like this is just better as a memory.”

He nodded and went back to staring at the fire.

She wondered if she would ever know what bothered him so much. There wasn’t much more time on this trip to discuss it.

Why was it easier to talk about her problems than it was to talk about his? She felt guilty that the conversation had turned around and become about her.

He was deflecting and she had just let it happen. She understood why he had turned out that way, he’d needed to defend himself against harsh realities.

He had been effectively orphaned, and it was the second time in his life that he knew that sort of loneliness.

Maybe he just felt like that child that had been taken in by the gang once again and it left him unable to face the problem as an adult.

Maybe he had determined it wasn’t the right time to discuss this because something else that needed his time and energy.

But she did know that whatever it was, it was on the verge of exploding. He looked so tired, like he hadn’t slept in days.

Eventually, she rolled over and managed to close her eyes. But his visage haunted her; it was hard to get any rest at all. She was exhausted.

She needed to sleep, but her only thoughts were on helping Grey with the pain she knew he was in. She had to come up with a plan to handle this before they split up.

She owed him that, at least.



He smelled the burning before he opened his eyes. It wasn't wood. It was something else.

Then, he heard the sizzle. Something on a rock. It had his attention.

Food. He was smelling food. But he knew he shouldn't be smelling food. He was the one who did the cooking here in camp.

Ava didn't have any ability to help with that. She had never cooked in her life.

And when her servants did her cooking, she didn't pay any attention to the journey her food had ever taken.

She had been in awe, watching carefully every time he had gathered food for them to eat, but this morning was different.

They hadn't eaten the day before. There hadn't been a chance to gather after all the work that they did just to get the fire going.

He slowly opened his eyes. Looking up at the sky, he saw that it was sunny again.

The brightness barely trickled through the canopy. There was dew on the leaves above his head.

Ava started to hum, and he turned his head to look at her. She was moving around near the fire, poking a stick at a rock placed right next

to the flames.

He picked himself up on an elbow to get a better look.

She grinned at him when he started to move more. “I made breakfast.”

“Breakfast?” He squinted. “Where did you get food?”

“I found some wild onions and some bird eggs.” She looked so proud of herself.

It made him smile to see her that happy. She deserved to have that kind of joy, and it made it easy for him to ignore the smell of the eggs burning as it wafted over to him.

He made up his mind not to mention it as she started to dish up the meal onto a couple of large broad leaves. It was a trick he had taught her during their trip.

“It looks good.” He nodded as she handed him the makeshift plate.

He watched her carefully, studying her features as the pride showed on her face.

But that joy almost faded the moment he put the first bite into his mouth. Everything tasted awful. It was overcooked in some places and undercooked in others.

She had tried, though, and he was determined not to let anything show. She had to have faith in herself if they were going to finish this journey on a high note.

She was going back to the life that she had before, sacrificing herself at the altar of businesses that weren't even hers. She couldn't own them or make the decisions for them.

He was saddened by that idea, frowning slightly.

“Is something wrong with the food?” She must have seen his expression change.

He quickly shook his head. “No. No, it’s amazing.”

She dished herself out a plate and tested a bite. Her face screwed up. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” Grey was determined not to give up this charade. He would let her believe that he loved the meal even if it was absolutely terrible.

“That I burned everything.”

“You didn’t burn anything.”

“Then how come everything you cook tastes so much better than this?”

Grey laughed. “Well, I have a little more practice than you, but you did just fine. The food is good, it’ll keep us going today.”

“Are you sure? I can try to do something else if you want me to.”

“There’s no need. Food is food.” He shook his head. “It’ll be just fine, we don’t have to worry about it. Just try to eat as much as you can then pass me what you have left.”

She looked down at her leaf for a moment then choked down a few more bites.

He finished up the food that he had been served and stood up to start putting out the fire by kicking dirt on it. Then, he gathered up the tin can that had filled with rainwater overnight.

He took a swig and passed it over to her. She drank the rest. He took the can back and started to refill it with dew and rainwater that had collected on leaves nearby.

Ava was watching him as he did this. It didn't take long for him to get them both full of all the water they could drink. That would help them keep moving.

She chewed on her lip as they started to walk through the trees.

"Is there something on your mind?"

"Just wondering if we're getting close."

"I hope we are." Grey laughed.

"Hope? Just hope? Do you even know?" She seemed to be panicking.

"I was just joking with you. We should start getting signs of life very soon."

Ava glanced around. "We're in the woods, there are signs of life everywhere."

"I mean human life."

"Are you nervous about going to town?"

Grey glanced at her. Ava was actually keeping up with him. It probably wouldn't last all day. "No, I don't think that it'll be a problem," he acknowledged.

"I've been to the town, but not too often. We don't rob the town. We need a place to sell the stuff we steal."

"Oh, I see. That makes sense." She nodded. "Bad business, I guess."

Grey smirked. "I guess you could call it that. It does take training and skills to do right." He shrugged.

Ava bit her lip and nodded. "I guess it's a little harder than it looks to jump off a train without getting hurt."

“It’s more dangerous to jump onto the train. If you miss, you’ll probably be run over by it.”

“That’s...” She fell silent.

“A death sentence.” He agreed with what she didn’t finish saying.

“Yes, that sounds bad.” She glanced around, not meeting his eyes.

“We need to keep moving.” He motioned her forward, changing the subject. “Let’s just keep going.”

“Right, oh, uh, do you guys treat it like a business?” She started to take a few steps before stopping again.

“Do you need a break?” He wouldn’t look straight at her.

She shook her head and started walking again. “No, I was just curious and forgot to walk.”

That drew a laugh from him. “That’s good to know. Try not to get you too curious if we’re moving.”

“You still didn’t answer my question.”

“We used to like to pretend that we were professionals in some kind of business, but we all knew we weren’t much more than common thieves,” Grey explained carefully, picking out each word to make his statement as clear as possible.

She seemed to understand what he was saying. “Ah, confidence makes better lies.”

“The lies we tell ourselves to get through our day.” He shrugged.

“My father used to say something like that.”

“Really?” He cocked an eyebrow.

“I think maybe a businessman and a thief aren’t that different in the long run.” She looked down at the ground as if the revelation was a little troubling.

“At least we don’t marry off our daughters.”

“Do any of you even have daughters?”

He grinned. “Not that we know about.”

“That’s good to know.” She nudged him with an elbow. A smile was starting to form on her face again. He was happy to be joking around with her a little bit.

She was so pretty when she was smiling and happy.

They crested a few hills and he squinted into the distance.

“Do you see something?” She craned her neck to get a good look through the trees.

He sighed and shook his head. “No, not yet. I was hoping we would get to town. I thought we’d at least be in sight of it already.”

Ava’s eyes widened. “Really? Why didn’t you say that?”

“Yesterday you were still angry at me.”

“Is this what kept you up all night?”

He shook his head. “I always have trouble sleeping. It’s normal for me to lay awake for hours before I manage to get any rest.”

She frowned. “That must be miserable. I normally sleep pretty deeply.”

“You could have fooled me. You’ve been tossing and turning every single night.”

She clasped her hands in front of her and her eyes traveled off to examine a tree off to the side as she passed it. She seemed a little embarrassed.

“I’m just used to mattresses.”

“That’s nothing to be embarrassed about.” He shook his head, softly chuckling under his breath.

“You come from a different world than I do. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Maybe you would sleep better if you managed to sleep on a mattress more.”

He snorted with laughter. “I’m pretty sure it’s not about where I’m sleeping. I just spend a lot of time thinking and it’s hard to shut off my mind.”

She nodded. “I suppose that makes sense. What sort of things do you think about?”

“Mostly what’s going on at that time, stuff that happened that day, big plans for the future, things like that. I think about what might have happened and things I could have done differently.”

“So, like if you hadn’t rescued me?”

“I would be lying if I said that it didn’t cross my mind, but I think I would regret not doing this.” He let his shoulders slump.

“I don’t want to be that kind of man, the one who can just let a woman die alone in the wilderness.”

“It was my own fault, you know?”

“It wasn’t your fault. Bart is a bad man who hurts people,” Grey told her.

“I tried to stop him from hurting people whenever I could, but it wasn’t the first time he’s tried to toss someone off of a train. I was lucky, the last time it happened I managed to pull the boy back up before he hit the ground.”

She looked at him in shock, stopping once again. “You did this before?”

“I got yelled at for it. Bart said I should have just let him die.”

“Bart was the one that threatened me, right?”

He nodded. “That would be the one. He’s our leader, the man who raised me after my parents died.” Grey shifted his weight from side to side.

She bit her lower lip, rocking back on her heels. Her auburn hair framed her face, matted around her head.

It was still pretty, even if there was a lot of mud from the rainstorm the night before.

She looked around for a moment, and Grey let the silence linger and fall into a comfortable space. He turned to start walking again.

“Let’s just keep moving.”

She nodded and walked along with him again. “So, did you like some things about the gang?”

“Yeah, they were great guys. We shared food and money when we could.”

“Do you have any money on you?”

Grey shook his head. “No, I don’t have that. I left it back at the main camp. I’m sure they’ve split up every bit of my savings by now.



"I abandoned them. They won't forgive that easily."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure a few of them might think that I did it to impress a woman, but Bart doesn't like losing people. And he practically raised me.

"This will be a giant betrayal. He never handles that sort of thing well. He might even try to kill me if we run into each other again."

"Maybe you shouldn't stay in the town, then." Ava walked as she talked this time.

She must have been expecting an answer like that because this time, she didn't stop dead in her tracks.

"Maybe. I don't know for sure, though."

"Why not?"

It was Grey's turn to bite his lower lip, mimicking Ava's unsure expression from earlier. "I don't know if I want to talk about that yet. Can we just trust that I know what I'm talking about?"

She nodded slowly. "Some things are just hard to talk about, I guess. I don't like talking about some stuff."

"I want to hear other things about you."

"Like what?" She tilted her head.

"Well, you said last night that you were wanting to get a job before you were sent out west. What got you interested in that?"

"I read a lot about botany, and from there I started trying to learn about making perfumes. I guess I just always loved all of the amazing things that we can make from plants.

“They release amazing scents and of course I had a large collection of custom perfumes. The perfumer in town always got business for me.

“I started to get a hold of books about it.” She was getting more and more excited as she went on.

He felt the ends of his lips start to turn up.

It was so nice to hear her talking like that. He let her go on and on about all the things she loved when she was studying. There was a real passion in her voice.

He almost walked into several trees, captured by every single thing that she had to say. It was magnetic when he heard her talk about this topic she clearly loved.

She started to point out flowers and plants and talk about them, explaining things that Grey didn't know. He knew a lot about native plants, mostly what was good to eat and what wasn't, but her knowledge was far beyond his.

She would easily be able to find a job if she really wanted one, maybe even work making medicines for people who needed them.

But he didn't say it, he just let her ramble on and on about everything she loved about the natural world until he looked up and realized the signs of civilization were coming up fast.

He pointed at the road curling around some hills in the distance. “That road will take us there.”

She bounced on her heels. Her body language said that she was excited, but the way she bit her lip told him that she was nervous about getting there. “How much longer?”

“Not too much.” He shook his head. “You'll be there soon.”

**A**va bounced on her heels. They were getting closer to town, and she was slowing down.

She didn't want to admit to herself that she wanted to spend more time around Grey. The journey hadn't been easy, but the company had been amazing.

Grey was funny and personable, when he wasn't trying to make sure they survived. She wished there was more time to just have a conversation.

Grey had been exhausted lately. The man didn't seem to be sleeping.

He looked at her. "You seem to be excited."

"Just ready to sleep in a bed."

"We have to pay for a room at the hotel," Grey reminded her.

He was chewing on a stick that he had picked up along the road. She had been offered one, but didn't take it.

She thought about it for a moment. It wasn't pleasant to think about the end of this journey not being the end of the trouble they would have to face.

"We'll have to get some money, then."

Grey stayed silent for a moment. He was likely considering what she had said. They had discussed money several times before.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Don’t worry about it,” he said.

She frowned. “That doesn’t feel very comforting.”

“I’m used to figuring things out as I go along.”

She bit her lip, considering what he was saying.

It still felt kind of odd to hear him so confident about this much uncertainty, but he didn’t seem bothered by their lack of funds at the moment.

Maybe she should just follow his lead.

Ava slowly nodded to herself, deciding not to ask any more questions about that.

“We’ll be there soon, don’t worry.” Grey seemed to misread her feelings on the matter.

She considered him for a second. “I’m not worried about that.”

Grey studied her carefully. “What are you worried about, then?”

She glanced down at herself, deciding not to continue to try to figure out the money issue. There had to be something she could actually have control over at the moment without being stuck in a rut of worry.

“I’m a mess.”

“We’re both a mess. We’ve been on the road for a long time.” Grey grimaced as he looked down at his boots.

She knew all of his clothes were old and worn. But they were taken care of.

Grey had told her that he knew how to do some patching because the bandit camp didn't have wives or mothers to take care of that sort of thing for them.

That meant they had to make sure it was all taken care of themselves.

She had thought about it. It made sense.

But now they were talking about actually getting to town. They didn't have a sewing kit, but there were other ways to clean up at least a little bit. "We should take a bath."

"A bath?" Grey frowned. "We should just get to town first. People out here don't bathe every week. We'll be fine."

"But we're going to have to rely on the kindness of strangers. Would you help someone that looked like us?"

"Maybe not, you may be right." He nodded along with her statement.

"I think there's a small creek not far from here. We can take a short detour and get there before we get to town."

"Good." She nodded. Ava had a plan now. And she was ready to do whatever she had to do to make this part of the trip work.

It was going to be up to her to do the talking. Nobody would believe that she was a lost little rich girl if she showed up looking like a mess.

A ripped dress wasn't anything she could fix, but she could at least clean herself and her clothes up a little. They were covered in dust and mud.

Grey led the way to the small creek. It didn't take long to find it.

She looked down at the water and paused.

Grey looked at her. "Is there a problem?"

"I don't think I've ever bathed like this before. Normally, we warm the water."

"Not sure I can do that at the moment." Grey laughed. "This is all we have."

"It'll have to do. I'll get through it."

"That's my girl."

The way he said it made Ava's heart skip a beat. Grey was the kind of man she had dreamed about when she was younger, but those kinds of dreams had faded when she stopped reading romances.

Those kinds of stories weren't real and she knew Grey didn't feel that way about her. He had been a perfect gentleman this entire trip.

Except for that one time he had let her cry on her shoulder, he hadn't touched her without her direct permission, and only for perfunctory reasons.

But now she was going to take a bath, and she looked down at the water. She could see fish swimming in there. "Will they touch me?"

"They might brush by you, but they won't do anything to you. You don't have to worry about them."

She glanced at the water and frowned again. Her nerves were drained already, and she wasn't sure how much more of nature she could handle. "I'm not so sure about that."

"You're a lot bigger than them. That means you're scarier. They'll be running away from you, I promise."

“Do fish even see that kind of stuff?”

“That they can’t eat you?” He looked confused.

“No, not like that, I mean, do they even know I’m something to be scared of?”

He sighed. “That’s the thing about animals. They have instincts. Sometimes, they can tell more about a person than we can.”

Ava chewed on the inside of her cheek and nodded. “I guess that makes sense.”

Grey leaned in. “Why don’t you take care of your bath. The faster we get to town, the happier you’ll be.”

“Do you mind keeping watch?”

He leaned back and cocked an eyebrow. “You want me to watch you?”

Ava shook her head. “No, I want you to watch around and not look at me.”

He laughed. “You almost gave me a heart attack, Ava.”

“I didn’t mean to.” His smile pulled one out in her. The embarrassment she should have felt at the implication just wasn’t there. They understood each other.

It was strange. Her family had never seemed to understand her as well as Grey did. And none of them were as patient as he was.

He walked away to stand near a tree, facing away from her as she slipped her dress off and climbed into the water.

The deep purple bruise over her ribs was absolutely hideous, reminding her of the fate that had sent her on this particular path. She was here and everything in her life had a new meaning.

Grey was amazing and taught her so much about the world, things she couldn't learn from the books that she had always carefully collected and read.

She had the book education, but he seemed to know more about living in the real world. It was admirable.

She carefully washed her dress, trying to get as much mud off as she could without causing more rips to form. It wasn't an easy task, but she enjoyed the tedious nature of it.

Soon, she had an almost clean dress that didn't look like she had been rolling around in a pigsty. She carefully wrung it out as much as she could then laid it on a large rock directly under the sun. The heat from the rock would make it dry quickly.

At least, she hoped that was the case. Walking all the way back to town in a sopping wet dress didn't sound ideal.

The rocks gave her a bit of trouble to clamber down into a good place to sit. It was slippery and she almost took a tumble.

Ava managed to avoid calling out and alerting Grey to her nakedness. He had seen far too much of her body already when he'd helped with her corset.

She had to maintain some decency. Ava knew there would be rumors because she had spent a week on the road with a man, but she didn't want to do anything that might make them worse.

She managed to climb fully into the water and sat down where the water came up to nearly her shoulders, carefully working the mud off of her skin and rinsing out her hair.

It was cold, and she shivered, but she fought through it, taking the time to work out as many tangles from her hair as she could. She had long since lost her hairpin.



That was a shame; it wasn't worth much, but maybe she could have traded it for something small to help them get what they needed once they got into town.

Grey didn't even make an effort to peek. She kept glancing up in his direction, but he was leaned against a tree, barely in sight and looking toward the town.

She assumed he was still chewing on that stick while he waited.

"I'm sorry it's taking so long," she called out.

"Take as long as you need." He didn't seem concerned. "I could use the break."

The water was actually starting to feel nice. It was cold, but she was able to adjust to it and take some time to luxuriate in the fresh, rushing water.

It swirled and bubbled, causing eddies to form around her. She found herself watching it for a while.

She walked out of the water and took a moment to shake the water from her skin. She didn't have a towel to dry off with, so it would have to do. She tested her dress.

It was still damp, but it wasn't soaking anymore. The rock had even warmed the cloth. That was going to feel nice when she slipped it on.

Grey was still in his spot by the tree. She walked over to him and spoke quietly. "Your turn."

He looked taken aback. "My turn?"

"I'll keep watch for you. Don't worry, I won't peek at all." She smiled at him.

He gave an awkward smile back in her direction.

She felt a little charmed by the way he looked at her. She was cleaned up, but she wasn't as cleaned up as she normally would be.

Still, he seemed to be impressed by the way she looked. His glances lingered a bit too long, but were always just within polite lengths.

She felt flattered by his attention, leaning forward a little too much. She corrected herself when she realized that she might be showing too much interest in a man she knew she could never be with.

Grey would have been a wonderful suitor had their lives been on some kind of path that would put them together.

She considered what could have been in her life if it had turned out differently, if she had been born out west to a less wealthy family or if he had been born to a wealthier eastern one.

It was a shame how all of this was happening.

Grey hadn't been born with money. And she had been born into luxury.

He stood there, staring off into the sky, and she wondered what it all meant. It was hard to figure out just what she wanted to happen with this relationship.

Nothing would be allowed to happen, but there was more than a small part of her that wanted more. She wanted him.

But that would never happen. It couldn't be allowed to happen. She had to regain distance — which was a lot easier when they were fighting.

**G**rey clambered over the rocks and into the water. Ava must have had a little trouble getting in, but he hadn't heard her complain about it.

His mind wandered over to the possibility of being interrupted. Getting caught with one's pants down was never pleasant, even less so when there was a young lady nearby who didn't have any sort of chaperone.

This was the West. Things were a bit more free than the world back east, from what he had heard, but it still felt awkward to think about her being just barely out of sight.

It had been a long trip, but it wasn't lonely because there was an ever-present company. Even with all her faults, Ava was good company when she didn't let her arrogance get the best of her.

She always had a bit of pleasant conversation to share and she had more knowledge than he even knew existed in the world. It was amazing to hear her speak about the things she had learned from all the books that she read.

Ava was a good woman who deserved the best out of life. He knew he wouldn't ever have been able to offer her that, and that his usefulness was soon to be over.

He was going to have to figure out his life once she left his presence.

There was a part of him that he kept trying to deny, a part that whispered impossible ideas in his head. It gave him dreams of her staying there with him, sticking by his side, the pair of them starting a brand-new life together.

His mind tried to keep his heart in check. It wasn't going to happen. Events like that never occurred.

He knew she didn't like to appear weak, but there were so many times he could have helped her if she had just asked. The trip could have been so much easier had she just let go of her pride.

It put him into a foul mood to think about all the ways her stubbornness could have forced additional difficulties on their trip.

The water was cold, rushing over his skin. It sent a shiver down his spine.

He wasn't ever a fan of baths, especially when they weren't in a tub, but he was no stranger to bathing in a stream, either. While he had been doing this since he was a young man, it was never something that he found particularly comfortable.

He started to scrub off as much of the road dust and mud as he could.

It took some time. He hadn't bathed in a couple weeks before they had robbed the train that had put him in the company of Ava.

It felt like it was taking forever, his frustration making him grunt with the effort of digging the mud from under his fingernails.

Ava called to him from her spot by the shore. She wasn't looking in his direction. "Are you all right?"

"Everything's fine."

She fell silent and he went back to work. It was easy to forget that she was there, standing by and guarding the bathing spot.

He could hear some moving in the brush, but didn't pay much attention to it. It sounded like it was Ava, anyway, way too big to be some small animal foolish enough to bother a human in the river.

He considered for a moment, then decided he should be sure it wasn't a mountain lion. He called out for Ava.

She answered him and he felt a little better.

Grey didn't feel like he really needed a guard. Ava was a good woman, but she wouldn't do much good if a wild animal or someone wanted to hurt them.

"Do you need anything?" Ava called out to him.

He wondered if she was just trying to find a reason to drag out the conversation between them. She had pretty much already asked that question, just in a different way.

He shook his head, then remembered she couldn't actually see him.

"I don't think there's much you can do to help." He laughed softly.

"I could maybe find you a leaf or something if you need it to help you dry off, but I don't have a spare towel, I'm sorry."

She sounded so happy. It made his heart soar.

"Not sure what good a leaf would do. I've got this. Don't worry."

The conversation died from there, Ava growing quiet.

Grey went back to bathing, trying to scrub weeks' worth of dirt from all of his crevices. The water was ice cold and made him tremble, but he felt the need to clean up as much as possible.

Ava had a steel-trap mind and if she thought cleaning up before they got into town was a good idea, then he would follow her lead.

He glanced over to the shore and saw that his clothes weren't folded up on the rock anymore. Ava must have snuck down and cleaned them while he worked, because they were drying under the sun now.

He smiled, pondering how he'd never noticed her sneaking so close to him, but it must have happened right after he'd first gotten into the water.

With how deep the water was, it was unlikely that she had seen much of anything. He shifted and went back to bathing.

It took a lot longer than he expected, and Ava didn't interrupt him again. She just let him bathe in peace. He couldn't even hear her moving.

Near the end, he took note of the quiet and frowned slightly, rushing the last bit to go and check on her. He considered shouting her name, but decided it would just look silly if he was panicking over nothing.

He chewed on his lip while he considered what to say. "You know, this is actually feeling kind of nice."

He didn't get an answer. It felt strange that she didn't seem to hear him.

He frowned and listened closely, trying hard to try to identify the sounds Ava would make moving around naturally on the shore.

She wasn't a sneaky woman. She should have made some sort of noise.

He heard nothing, no breathing, no mumbling, no moving around. No footsteps in the grass. Nothing.

There were no sounds that indicated another person was anywhere close.

Grey had to go find out what had happened to her. She could have

gotten hurt or wandered off and gotten lost in the wilderness.

They were close to town, but still far enough away that Ava could get lost.

He hadn't heard anyone attack, but that didn't mean anything. Animals could be quiet if they managed to get an instant kill.

He could have missed the noises under the splashing of water when he wasn't paying attention. That was what he was terrified of, mostly.

He rushed out of the water and up onto the shore, grabbing his still damp clothes and tripping over himself as he dressed while running over to the spot where he had left her keeping watch.

Ava wasn't there.

His heart seized, then started to pound. He sent furtive glances around, but couldn't see Ava anywhere near where she should have been.

His eyes searched the ground. There was a small comfort in the fact that he saw no signs of struggle. There was no blood on the ground, either.

That was good. Maybe the woman had just wandered off. That still wasn't ideal, but it was the best possibility.

"Ava?" His voice was plaintive as he called out.

Grey strained his ears, trying to listen for any sound of life. No answer came. Nothing, except the sounds of nature.

He tried a little louder. "Ava!"

The woman he was supposed to be taking care of was missing.

Again, no answer came, and the worst possibilities flooded his head,

running out of control and without mercy. He shivered heavily. “Ava!” Another yell.

One more time, there wasn’t an answer.

He looked down. Her footprints seemed to lead off, but they were quickly lost in the underbrush. He wouldn’t be able to track her.

He hurried off toward where her footprints were heading, slowing down only when he started to trip himself up and lose track of the trail she had left behind.

He kept calling for her, screaming her name into the plains. If she didn’t hear him, it meant there was something terribly wrong.

Those thoughts bounced through his head, making him panic as he frantically searched the area, wandering a few steps in one direction before he turned and ran a few steps in another. He couldn’t decide which way to search first.

Her voice came out of nowhere. “What’s wrong?”

His head snapped around and he took off running toward the sound. He frantically bolted around a small copse of trees before he managed to find her.

He was grateful and had to stop himself from rushing up and hugging at her, then yelling at her right afterwards. That would have broken the rules she had set for them.

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to yell at her for disappearing or celebrate the fact that she was alive first.

Ava had a bunch of weeds and flowers in her skirt. He looked at her, and she looked confused when she saw his face.

She wasn’t in any trouble, she had just wandered off to pick wildflowers.



“What happened to you?”

“You seemed to be doing fine, so I went to go get some herbs and flowers.”

“We didn’t need that stuff. I needed to know that you were all right, and right where I told you to be.”

She squinted at him. “Are you telling me what to do?”

“I’m telling you I can’t keep you safe if you wander off.” He was breathless.

A part of him wanted to shake her to make her understand the danger a young woman could be in if she wandered off like she had been.

“I don’t need you to keep me so safe that I can’t go for a walk.” She put her hand on her hip.

He groaned in frustration. “That’s not what I meant. If you had gotten into trouble, I wouldn’t have known to help you. That’s all.”

She gave him an irritated glance, but she didn’t continue arguing. Instead, she smiled. Her face seemed to melt his anger away, letting it all fall to the wayside.

Honestly, he was just glad that Ava was safe. She didn’t seem upset that he had been so bothered by her absence — rather, she appeared flattered by his attentiveness.

Ava was silent as they traveled on. Grey had told her they would arrive the next day.

They wouldn't have much time to talk after this, but it was hard to find anything to say after so much time on the road.

They had exhausted all conversation either of them could come up with, it seemed.

She sighed, looking up at the sky. The sun was bright enough that she had to cast her gaze back down almost immediately, feeling a little foolish.

Ava knew better than to look at the sun. She sighed.

Grey glanced over at her. "Are you all right?"

"Just going through what needs to be done in my head, that's all." She shook her head. "I hope it all turns out well."

"It'll be fine."

Something about the way Grey had said those words made her feel better. It was a comfort that she had come to count on. It had been tough, but Grey had made it better.

He deserved more than to be burdened with the tiny worries that wouldn't get out of her head. "I know."

Grey nodded. The moment had become awkward. "We should make camp soon."

"It's still early, isn't it?"

"It's better if we turn in early. If we kept going, we would be traveling most of the night. It's best to stop for the night and get there fresh in the morning."

Grey wasn't looking at her, and Ava wondered what was on his mind. He seemed thoughtful, but it was hard to tell what he was thinking about.

She knew he had been troubled by what he had lost over this. He didn't speak about Bart and his gang often, but it was clear Grey regularly thought about his past.

It haunted him.

She would never be able to understand just how deeply the invisible wounds had gone over his years of suffering and hardship, but that knowledge just made her want to fix it and tell him he would never have to worry about anything like that again.

She watched him, slowing down to walk a step behind him. It gave her time to regard him. He was her savior, having given up so much to protect her.

She didn't know if she could get her father to pay him some sort of reward, but there had to be a way. His life was difficult and it would be hard for him to get a new start without at least a little bit of money.

"Have you found a good spot to camp yet?"

"I want us to be a little off the road. I'd rather not run into anyone here." Grey spoke quietly, searching around.

“This is our last night on the road, right?”

“We should get into town by tomorrow afternoon.” He nodded, turning off to the side until he could find a small spot sheltered by a tree.

She walked over and started the task of gathering up firewood. It had become a habit and she no longer needed to be instructed to make sure they had plenty.

Grey had taught her how to find dry wood that was laying on the ground, fallen limbs rather than fresh green wood directly from the tree.

There wasn't much to be found. She frowned and continued to wander around, staring hard at the ground.

Grey called out to her from the camp, “Don't wander off too far.”

She didn't bother looking up. “I can't find much wood.”

“This place must be picked pretty clean.”

“What does that mean?”

“Maybe someone from near town. They might have been collecting near here because they needed to make camp.”

“Do people often camp near town?” She started to make her way back to Grey's side.

“If they don't have money for the hotel.” He shrugged.

“Are we going to have to do that?” Ava's eyes kept searching the landscape.

Even if the place had already been scoured for the small pile of wood they had managed to find, she was still hopeful she could find a

hidden cache that would give them enough to get through the night.

“I don’t know yet, we’ll have to figure out what to do when we get there. I don’t have much money on me.”

“I don’t have any money on me. It’s all in my bags on the train.”

He frowned. “Maybe they dropped your bags off at the train station in town.”

“I hope so.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it, though. They’ll probably take it along to a better station for you.” Grey shook his head. “Or to the station you’re supposed to get off at.”

“I don’t know why they would even think to find me. They’ll probably be trying to get it back to my family, assuming I’m dead.” She frowned.

“Good thing you didn’t die, then.” Grey gave a wry smile.

“Of course I didn’t die.” She laughed. “I had you come to save me.”

“You had to help save yourself. You’ve done so well on this trip. I expected you to give up days ago.”

“I don’t give up that easily.” She shook her head.

It was nice to be happy. Happiness had been so hard to find before this trip, now she was finding it in the oddest places.

She wondered if Grey felt the same way, or even if he would stick around when they finally got to town. Once she was safe, his obligation to her was over and he would be free to seek his own fortune.

Ava didn’t ask, knowing it would be rude to put that uncertainty into

words. She would accept as much help as Grey was willing to give and then wish him luck when he decided to walk away.

“Well, I don’t have much, but I can probably get us set up in a hotel there.”

She nodded and cocked an eyebrow. “You plan on paying for the hotel?”

“I might have enough to pay for a night or two, depending on the rates.” Grey shrugged. “We’ll have to figure out what to do from there.”

“Ah, ok, I see.” She considered it. “I’m going to go find wood now.”

“Don’t go too far. I don’t want to see you getting hurt.”

“I won’t, I promise.” She turned and walked away while Grey started to work on the fire with the small bits of wood that he had found.

She had to go a little bit farther from the camp, but she did manage to fill her arms with wood and head back to stack it up for Grey.

“You did good,” Grey said when she returned, grinning at her.

She was taken aback by the compliment. It took a moment for the pride to start filling her. Her shoulders squared and she straightened up.

The confidence would have burst out of her if it could have.

He was still smiling as he got up to help stack the wood.

Their hands brushed against each other. Her heart fluttered and she locked eyes with him.

Grey’s jaw relaxed, his smile growing easier, and she felt her cheeks start to burn.

Ava knew it was a bad idea to let this man get to her like that, but there was just something about Grey.

She tried to tell herself that it wasn't because he was so kind and had saved her, but a part of her wondered if she was one of those women who was falling for her rescuer, like a princess from a fairy tale.

That was not what she wanted to be. She'd always thought she was better than that, but it seemed Grey brought out that side in her.

She turned to look away from her companion for a moment, thinking about what it all meant. It wasn't something she could talk to Grey about.

He couldn't know about these feelings. She couldn't have Grey, it wouldn't be a life that either of them wanted to live.

She didn't have the skills to live in his world and he would never be able to live in hers; he didn't have the money and her parents would never approve of it.

Grey didn't say anything for a long while. Ava enjoyed the silence, staring at the fire as it started to grow, and Grey went off to find something for dinner.

She assumed it would be some berries and maybe an egg or two. It wouldn't be much, but it would stave off the worst of the hunger pangs.

They hadn't had much to eat over the course of the trip, mostly whatever Grey could forage and a few fish.

Grey only came back with some edible leaves and flowers and a few wild onions. That was what dinner was going to be.

She took the food and started to assemble it into a small salad.

Grey watched her and smiled, not commenting, just seeing her turn a

flat rock into a dinner plate so they had something to eat off of.

She tilted her head at him as an idea started to form in her mind. “Could we sell something that we find, maybe?”

“I’m not sure what we could sell.” Grey shook his head.

She started to search her surroundings for something that she could suggest. She hadn’t really thought out that plan.

It was a little embarrassing to not have any sort of suggestion.

She thought about all the things Grey had foraged and caught for them on this long trip through the wilderness of the American West.

“What about fish?”

“I think most people who live out here know how to fish.” He laughed lightly.

Ava felt embarrassed by that statement. She should have known better than to suggest something like that.

Grey frowned as she fidgeted. He was watching her closely.

“Look, I’m sure we can find some kind of odd jobs to do, something to get us a little money until we can get you where you’re supposed to go.”

She sighed. “I’m going to miss this.”

“Miss this?” Grey’s eyebrow rose.

“Being out here. It’s kind of nice, I guess, at least now that I’m used to it.”

Grey still hadn’t lost his smile — in fact, it was widening. “You’re a tough woman, you would do good in the West.”



“I wouldn’t say that. Everything is still so strange to me out here, but I love learning all about it.”

“You’re an excellent student, and you know a lot about it, too, mostly about plants and the like.”

“I spent a lot of time in books. I already told you, I want to be a perfumer.”

“That sounds like a wonderful career. You would be great at it.”

His words meant the world to Ava. Even though Grey didn’t know much about the art of scents, his confidence in her was something she had never heard from anyone before.

The way he said it made her realize just how much someone believing in her meant. She didn’t have to fight for someone to give her a chance, Grey simply trusted she could do it.

She puffed up with pride, and her smiling face must have shown him exactly how she felt about his words because he smiled back at her.

It was a nice smile, one that reached his eyes, but wasn’t overstated or too wide. A shy smile from a man she’d never thought she would see that kind of adoration from.

**G**rey led the way into town. He had been here several times and he expected a cold welcome.

They didn't do anything to him, normally, but his gang was known for their crimes and people treated them like they were barely human.

They brought business and luxuries into the town, so he found himself tolerated. Nobody could prove what they had done and the law didn't do much investigation.

That was normal, but everyone still knew about what the gang had done.

This trip into town was different. He wondered if there was a reason he was greeted with a bright smile and a tip of the hat as he walked onto the main drag.

Ava was staring around in awe, so he had the chance to hide his shock from her.

He almost laughed at her reaction. She was wide-eyed, trying to look everywhere at once.

She gasped, examining the storefronts. It was plainly obvious that the buildings behind the impressive displays were not as nice as the well-painted front walls.

"It's so cute."

“Cute?” Grey tilted his head.

“This town, it’s so small and cute. Do they even have anything here? I’ve never seen a town this small.” Her eyes were wide.

Grey burst out laughing. “I’ve never heard a town called cute before. That’s a new one.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Well, what would you call it?”

“A town. It’s just a town.” Grey shrugged.

Her reaction caught more of his attention than the state of the town did. She had such an air of excitement around her that it caught him up in her excitement.

“It’s not a big one, but it’s not that small.”

She waved her hands around. “It’s got one street.”

“What were you expecting?” He snickered.

“I don’t know, something bigger than this? It’s only got one street. What kind of town only has one street? It’s only about five blocks long. That’s the whole town.

“I can see from one side of town to the other.” She shook her head in disbelief. “It’s smaller than our estate back home.”

Grey snorted. “This is pretty normal in the West.”

“Have you ever been out East?”

Grey shook his head. “Not really, at least not that I remember much of. I might have gone on a visit when I was little, but I’ve lived in these parts my whole life.”

“How do people live like this?”

“They just live.” Grey shrugged.

She glanced around. Grey kept leading them into town.

Another man tipped his hat at him, and Grey tried not to act surprised by the reaction as he walked a few buildings down from where they had come into town.

He led the way to the post office. “Why don’t you write a letter?”

“What about a telegram?”

“I don’t think we’ll have the money for that.” Grey shook his head.

Ava sighed. “A letter would take a while to get there.”

“I know, but you’ll be fine. I’ll be here with you until you’re safe, I promise.”

She smiled softly at him. “Thank you.”

“You should go and write that letter now.” He had been taken aback by her smile again and needed to get her distracted by something else.

She chewed on her lip, her smile starting to fade. “I don’t know how I will post it?”

“Send it cash on delivery, but just in case.” Grey pulled out a couple coins from his pocket to hand to her.

She took the money and walked into the post office. Grey waited, considering what to do.

The saloon looked fairly busy, and that would mean rooms might be a bit more expensive than normal. There were too many people in town.

Some of them may have come off the train Grey had helped rob.

He frowned. They were going to need a way to make some money, but he didn't have many skills that would allow him to earn the kind of money they would need.

Ava took a while to handle the letter.

He wondered what sort of things she would write to her father, but was quickly distracted from those thoughts when a few men and women greeted him.

They offered warm words and nods in his direction. It was still so odd.

Ava came back out before he could try to figure out exactly what was going on in this town. It was like it had flipped upside down.

Every other time he had come into town was with the gang, and they never treated the gang like that. No one was friendly to Bart or the other men Grey worked with.

Ava poked him in the shoulder. "I sent the letter."

Grey started and straightened out his hat. "Good. Let's get to the hotel and find out what this is going to cost us."

"Cost you, because I didn't grab my wallet on the way off the train."

"You didn't exactly take a traditional exit from it." Grey smirked at her and strode across the road.

"Where's the hotel?"

"Just up ahead." Grey nodded and walked down the road a bit.

The saloon was right next door to the hotel, attached to it but not sharing the same entrance. He showed her inside the building. "Have a seat by the door."

She chewed on her lower lip. "I can go up with you."

“You’ll just look out of place. Let me do my thing.”

She sighed and nodded.

He walked up to the desk and leaned over it, offering a smile to the clerk. He hoped he was charming enough to make this work.

The clerk was not amused by his demeanor and sent him on his way. It was a disappointment, but not entirely unexpected.

Kindness wasn’t in his cards, and he was told there was no way they would be able to stay there for the night.

Grey had tried his best, but there were other options. He knew of a few, but wasn’t sure how Ava would take them.

His normal course of action would be to steal or find a place to squat. His companion likely wouldn’t agree to either of those suggestions.

“What is it?”

“We can’t afford two rooms for the night.”

“What are we going to do?”

He considered for a moment then sighed. “I’ve got an idea. I’m going to go try to play some poker so we can get the money to do this.”

“Don’t do that.” Ava stood up to meet him.

“I don’t see us having much choice in the matter.” Grey shook his head.

“There has to be another choice. We can go sleep outside of town like we did on the way into town. You don’t need to gamble. What if you lose everything?”

Grey frowned. He didn’t like the assumption Ava was making about

him. He tried not to act like he was offended by it, but it was a little upsetting.

“I’m not going to lose everything. Have some faith in me.”

Ava bit her lip. “I’m not saying I don’t have faith in you.”

“What are you saying, then?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think this is a good idea. I think there’s probably a better plan, we just have to find it.”

Grey wasn’t going to give in. He was the one from this area. He had a better grasp at what was possible than she did.

It was his job to make sure that she got to her destination safely.

“I’m good at poker. I can get the money. It’s the fastest way to get us the amount we need.”

She shook her head. “Maybe there’s another way.”

“I don’t think there’s another way, but we’ll figure this out. Just stay outside the saloon. You don’t need to be in a place like that.”

He forced a smile at her. “I know it’s not going to be easy, but I can do this. I just can’t have you distracting me.”

“I’m not just going to stand out in the street and wait on you,” she huffed.

“Then go into the general store.” Grey waved her off dismissively.

He knew it was wrong to treat her that way, but it didn’t feel like there was a better way to get her to leave him alone. He didn’t have any other options.

He walked out of the hotel, unable to face her after saying something

like that to her. She deserved better than the way he had spoken to her, telling her how it was going to be.

The truth was that he had borrowed some money from the man at the desk of the hotel, telling him some of the story that had brought them there, and was intending to use that in order to make some more of the money.

The hotel would occasionally spot gamblers, it was a good side business for them. He had known about that. That was why he had to do this.

He had to find a way to take care of Ava.

He was good with cards. He could make the money they needed, but he had to have his head on straight in order to do it.

Grey just needed to forget the insulted look on Ava's face. She would never be able to understand any of this.

Ava turned around and rushed up to try to stop him. She grabbed his arm. "Grey?"

"What?" He didn't turn to face her.

She leaned back, pulling her hand away from his arm. "I'm sorry. I'll go wait in the general store."

"Good. Just stay safe." He was grateful.

That would give him one less thing to worry about. Life wasn't easy and probably wouldn't be easy for a long time, but at least Ava wasn't being as stubborn now.



**A**va walked to the general store. She wasn't planning on staying there, however. She had a plan in mind and she wasn't sure Grey would like the idea very much.

In fact, she was pretty sure she would be starting a new fight.

That was why she had given in on the fight they were having at that hotel. He was distracted, and she could try to use her charms to try to find a job of some kind that gave them a place to stay.

She bounced into the general store and made her way right up to the counter.

The shopkeeper looked at her with a smile. He seemed nice enough. "May I help you with something?"

She knew she had to ask the right question to get the right answer. It felt like there was a lot riding on whatever she said.

Nothing particularly impressive came to mind, nothing that would convince the world to help them, so she just decided to go with direct honesty.

"I was wondering if you know of any families that are looking for tutors."

"Tutors?" The man leaned forward. "We've got a school in town. It isn't much, but the teacher is a wonderful lady."

“I’m sure you do, sir, but this isn’t like that. Perhaps I could work out a deal to help take care of children and teach them languages or arithmetic or something of the sort to supplement their schooling.”

She nodded. “I know I could really do a good job at it, and I need a job.”

The man considered her carefully, looking her up and down. Ava felt a little ashamed of the state of her dress, but tried not to show it. “Did you go to school?”

“Yes sir, I went to school back East.”

“An East Coast girl. How’s the West treating you?” The general store owner had a friendly, jovial voice.

But she felt like she was being interviewed for something. She tried to stifle her nerves and take it as a good sign.

“It’s been going well, sir. I’m happy to be here.” It was a lie. Her tale so far was complicated and she didn’t want to get into it.

“Ah, all right. You’re looking for nanny work, then?” The man leaned against the counter.

She considered then decided to just agree with it. It would be easier to just take any job she could get rather than trying to nitpick whatever was offered to her.

Tutoring jobs would likely require some small amount of child care, anyway.

“Yes, I’m looking for some sort of work. I’d be happy to work with children if someone needed the help.” Ava nodded.

She worried she was looking a little too excited over the prospect.

It wasn’t good to appear like she was trying too hard. She had to play

it cool. It took a lot to calm down enough so she wasn't rude to the man behind the counter.

The shopkeeper frowned and tilted his head. It was an exaggerated thinking motion that almost made Ava laugh.

She had to bite her lip to stop the giggles from bursting out when the older man tapped his chin.

Ava waited, rocking back and forth on her heels and trying to stay patient. It was hard not to start tapping her toes.

She felt as if she had lost a few of her social skills while she was walking through the plains. Grey had been good company, but it had been a week since she had spoken to anyone but the bandit who had rescued her.

Finally, he answered, "I might know a guy. Just lost his wife. Needs the help with the kids."

"Great. Does he have the space for me and my..." Ava thought about it for a second. "Husband?"

"I'm sure the ranch could use the extra help. You should go talk to him. He's not that far outside of town. Maybe he can help you out."

She nodded. "Thank you so much."

"Is there anything else I can help you with?"

She shook her head. "Sadly, until I can find work, I don't have much money for you."

"A sad state of affairs, but I look forward to seeing you again once you get back on your feet."

Ava practically skipped out of the general store.

Everything was finally coming together. It wasn't easy, but there was work for them and when she left, she might be able to leave Grey with a job.

In the meantime, she had to come up with something other than gambling to pay for a hotel room.

She shivered as she followed the directions the shopkeeper had given her.

The ranch was literally just outside of town and it took her less than five minutes to walk there. She was grateful for that.

There was a man there, on the porch. He smiled at her, but it wasn't a real smile. His eyes were still sad.

It broke her heart to see it. The man was drawn, bags under his eyes. He seemed like a man who didn't know what to do with himself.

She had seen people broken by life before, but this man looked like he was still just trying and didn't know what to do about all the new responsibilities that he had found.

She didn't know if she was just reading problems where none existed because of what the shopkeeper had told her, but she could have sworn that he was struggling just to keep going.

She slowed down, making her way across the yard and up to the porch.

He looked at her curiously. "May I help you?"

She nodded. "I was hoping I might be able to work for you. I don't need much, just room and board. We've got some money coming in, but it won't come in right away."

"How long are you looking to stay?"

"I'm not sure yet. I had to write back to my family because we missed our train and don't have the money to try to keep traveling yet."

She smiled. "It may take a few weeks or maybe more."

He chewed on a straw in his mouth, then nodded. "What can you do?"

"Well, I can help teach and care for children. And my husband is a hard worker, willing to learn anything you need to teach him."

"Sounds like a good thing to me. How much do you know about children?"

"I've been around them." Ava winced. It was the truth, but she knew it didn't sound good. "I'm willing to learn anything I have to. I just don't want us to end up homeless."

The older man studied her face for a second. His gaze was so strong that it made her feel even more awkward about her request.

She was almost certain he was going to say no. There was no reason to trust a random woman approaching his ranch.

Her heart thudding, she looked down at her feet. "I'm sorry, I overstepped my bounds."

The old man waved off her apology. "You two are in a bad spot, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

The rancher nodded. "My name is Gus."

"I'm Ava." So much weighed on her making a good impression.

"The owner of the general store pointed out that you might need some help, and I decided the worst thing that could happen was that you would say no."

“I could use the help. Why don’t you and your husband come by for dinner tonight and get to know the little ones. At least you’ll have a hot meal.”

She bounced excitedly. “Thank you so much. You won’t regret this.”

“I hope not.” He laughed.

Ava grinned. She was more than happy with the way that had turned out.

She hadn’t fully gotten the job, but at the least they had a chance to make a good impression on the rancher.

The West was a strange place. There was such hopelessness, but there were also people willing to give strangers a chance just off the street.

As she walked away from the ranch, she wondered if Grey was out of the saloon yet. If he was done in there, it was certain he would be worried about her.

She rushed back into town; the walk back felt longer than the walk to the ranch. She had good news and it was hard to wait to share it with Grey.

She got to the saloon, but didn’t see Grey outside of it. She considered peeking inside, but decided it was a bad idea.

Instead, she headed back to the general store where Grey had told her to wait.

She walked inside and the shopkeeper greeted her with a smile, a real one. “How did it go?”

“Well, my husband needs to talk to him, but I think we’ll be fine now.” She nodded. The friendliness of everyone in this town excited her. “Thank you.”

“It was no problem. I never mind helping people out when they need it. And there’s a lot of people that have trouble out in these parts.” The man shook his head sadly.

“There are?”

The man asked at Ava, like she should have already known the answer to that question. “Life is tough around here.”

The way the general store owner said it brought a few more questions to Ava’s head. “I’ve heard some tales. But if it was that hard, no one would come, would they?”

“It’s hard, but if you can make it work, it’s worth it. You can own land for free by homesteading it, for example.”

“I’m sure it takes a special person to do that sort of thing.”

“We have a lot of people that run into trouble seeking fortune and glory. Most people just can’t handle it.”

“What do you do if something goes wrong?” She was curious.

Grey’s story was playing in her head as she wondered what would have happened to him if his life had taken a slightly different turn.

“We do what we can. It’s not perfect, but if we find someone in trouble, we try to help. Sometimes it’s just not possible, of course.”

“Does someone usually take in those children?”

“Or we send them back East, especially if we can find some family of theirs.”

She thought about Grey. He had been one of those that had fallen through the cracks, and it had destroyed his life.

But these people were nice. She just had to teach Grey that he could

trust people again.

The gang had taught him that these people would never like or support him, but she knew better. Grey was a good man, and if he gave them a chance, these people would see it, too.

The conversation continued while she watched out the window for Grey to be done either winning a lot of money or losing it all.



Grey rubbed his forehead. This wasn't going as well at all. He was going to have to find Ava and explain that the little money they had was now gone.

He had been certain he was going to take the hand, but the man across the table had a full house. Aces over eights. He couldn't believe the man's luck.

There was a part of him that questioned if the man was cheating. This mysterious gambler just seemed a bit too lucky. Everyone else was quickly driven off the table.

But Grey had been stubborn. It was foolish, but he was desperate.

He threw down his hand and got up out of his seat. There was nothing more to do about this but leave. He couldn't even afford a drink now.

He had borrowed money to do this, and now he had lost everything. This was a debt he didn't know when he would be able to pay back.

He sighed.

The man looked up at him with a grin. "Pleasure doing business with you."

Grey just grumbled and kicked a chair enough to shift it off to the side. It wasn't strong enough to break anything and didn't attract any sort of attention from the bartender.

He turned to walk out of the bar, leaving the place behind him.

Once outside, he glanced up and down the street. He didn't see Ava there.

She must have stayed at the general store. That was where he had sent her to stay while he dealt with the rough people there at the bar.

He hadn't wanted her to have to deal with men like that. They could be rather crass when a beautiful young woman came into their presence.

That was something he was certain Ava had never had to deal with.

He kept his head down and his hands in his pocket as he walked across the street toward the store. He was a failure.

He had messed up every single plan they had, and they would likely end up camping outside of town until her father could write back and send money along.

He sighed as he approached the door, pausing on the wooden porch of the building. He stood off to the side, trying to find a way to explain this to Ava.

He had to gather his thoughts before he faced the woman he had promised to take care of. He blamed himself for all of this. She deserved better.

Maybe it would have been better if he didn't want to impress her so much.

It was wrong. He shouldn't want to impress her like that. But it would have been nice to not mess up as soon as they showed up in town.

He could have given her a comfortable time and shared her happiness.

Sighing, he knew he had to go in and face the music anyway.

He barely had his hand on the door when it opened up. Ava was right there, looking at him. She looked so happy. It was going to be terrible when he had to break it to her.

He imagined the heartbroken look on her face, but before he could say anything she flew at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Skirts fluttered in the wind and he took a step back. Grey barely caught her before she slid off his chest and hit the ground.

“I got us a job,” she told him, sounding breathless.

“A job?” Grey frowned. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve been invited to dinner at a ranch. I told the shop owner about being stranded here and he pointed us to a nearby ranch.”

“Oh, what are we going to do?”

“You’re going to be helping him out around the ranch and I’ll be helping with his children. He’s a lovely widower named Gus.”

Grey thought about it. He knew he was going to have to tell her about the money, but she had found a solution herself. He felt bad for not listening to her before.

If it was so simple to find work, he didn’t know why anyone ever fell into banditry or gambling to try to make a living.

He smiled at her. “Good. That’s great.”

“He’s agreed to talk to us over dinner.”

He grinned. He was happy.

It would make the news he had to share easier for her to handle, knowing they had a path to a fairly comfortable life until they managed to get her back on the road.

It gave him hope, but embarrassed him more about the state he was in.

“How did the game go?”

“Not well.” Grey decided to just go with honesty.

She frowned. “You lost it all, didn’t you?”

He grimaced. “I’m sorry, I did.”

“At least I found a better way to handle this, but it’s going to be harder starting from nothing,” she pointed out.

“Less than nothing,” Grey amended.

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing you have to worry about.” Grey shook his head.

She didn’t look happy, but she didn’t ask more questions about it.

She seemed to understand that the answers to the questions his comment had naturally brought up weren’t ones she wanted to hear.

At least, that was what he hoped she understood.

She shook her head. “We need to get to this dinner.”

“Let’s go.” Grey carefully put Ava back down on the ground. “You look happy.”

“Well, I am happy. I was actually able to help.”

Grey couldn’t help it. He laughed. “You’ve been helping.”

“But not much.” She shook her head. Ava was serious. She wasn’t joking or laughing.

Grey straightened himself up. "Is there anything I need to know about this?"

Ava stopped and chewed her lip. "There is one thing."

He squinted. "What did you do to get us this job?"

"That's not it." Ava shook her head. "It's nothing like that. It's just that I had to explain our relationship.

"We just came walking into town together. So I said we were, well..."

She didn't finish.

"What? Brother and sister?"

"No, uh, something else." She shook her head.

Grey groaned as he put it all together. "You said we were married."

"I did, but it'll be all right. We can handle this. It's going to turn out fine."

"You set the rules when we started this trip, and you're breaking them now. I can't believe this."

"I promise, it's going to be fine." She shook her head. "I just needed something in a hurry and that was what came to mind."

"Well, it looks like I'm married now."

She rolled her eyes and started to walk down the road. "The ranch is this way. I promise it won't take us long to get there, it's pretty close to town.

"I don't know much about ranching, but the rancher is a widower and he has two young children to raise. I can help them learn and you can help around on the ranch."

"I don't know anything about ranching." Grey shook his head.

"Didn't you live on one when you were a child?"

Grey sighed. "It was when I was a child. I don't remember the little bit I learned."

She frowned, chewing on her bottom lip. "I'm sorry, I didn't think about that."

"You don't need to apologize. I'm sure I can learn whatever I need to know. If this keeps us from sleeping on the ground, it'll be worth it."

She smiled. "We should go meet Gus. He's waiting for us."

"I'm coming." Grey smiled a little as he followed her to the path. Her exuberance made his heart skip. There was just something about her that drew him in.

The thought of being considered married to her excited him. He would never be worthy of a wife like that, but she didn't seem to think it was so odd.

Or maybe she did. Grey didn't know how she felt. He could never really read her.

She was a beautiful woman who could have her pick of any young man in the world. And she was excited to spend time with him.

It would have been unbelievable, except for that he knew those feelings couldn't ever go anywhere. She was just using the story as a way to be safe.

The ranch they approached looked nice, reminding him of his parents' house. He found himself freezing when they reached the porch.

Ava turned back when he stopped talking and softly tugged him up to the door. She knocked and soon they were both let into the house.

The old man seated them and served up a rather plain potato casserole from the oven. It wasn't much, but it was home-cooked and Grey felt his stomach growl at the smell.

Two young children sat at the table. The oldest couldn't have been more than ten years old. Grey was reminded of his youth.

These children were healthy, but they looked sad. Life was hard for young ones. Grey remembered how painful it was when he lost his parents.

These children had only lost their mother, but that didn't make their situation much better. They still only had a father to care for them, a man who had work to do and didn't have time to give them the attention they would need to deal with the loss.

The father may be strong, but the children had a forlorn look about them.

He didn't blame them.

They didn't say anything to greet them, obviously nervous around the strangers in their home.

It had been a long time since he had a meal like that, no matter how plain.

Ava looked half-starved, herself. She ate with more manners than he had ever learned, but she still ate quickly.

The rancher, Gus, watched them carefully. He had a look of pity on his face, but he didn't say anything until they managed to eat their fill.

Then, he finally spoke. "You two look like you've had a difficult time."

Grey nodded.

Ava took over most of the speaking. “We made it through. We just needed the work. Thank you.”

“It’s a hard life out here. Since I lost my wife and son...” The man let the words linger in the air.

“Your son, too?” Ava looked down at the table. “I had only heard about your wife.”

“I don’t like talking about it much, but don’t let it worry you. But my boy was helping around the ranch. I would appreciate the extra help from your husband.”

Grey nodded again.

Ava smiled. “You won’t be disappointed. He’s a good man and a hard worker. If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t have made it out here.”

“It’s good that you have him, then.” Gus smiled. “May I ask what skills you two have?”

“Well, I’m skilled in multiple languages: English, Italian, and French. I’ve studied botany and have taken advanced classes in many subjects.”

“Can you cook?”

Ava shook her head. “Not really, but I would be willing to learn if you could teach me. This is excellent.” She indicated her plate.

The rancher nodded. “And what about you, Mr. Grey?”

Grey fidgeted. He didn’t know what to say about his skills.

He didn’t have any talents. There was nothing special he could offer in exchange for a place to stay and hot food on the table.

He looked down at his hands.



Ava cleared her throat before Grey had a chance to announce that he wasn't capable of anything other than stealing.

"He's strong and capable. He learns new things quickly and knows how to fish and ride horses.

"He's a good man who doesn't panic when there's trouble, always knowing exactly what to do. He may not know about ranching, but anyone would be a fool not to hire him because he can do anything and will put passion into the job."

That recommendation sounded so lovely, like it didn't belong in the same room as him. He couldn't honestly believe anyone would think that about him.

He was a common thief, a bandit who robbed trains. Grey wasn't a good man, and none of those words had ever been used to describe him before.

Gus looked him over carefully. Silence filled the room.

The children excused themselves from the table. Grey had almost forgotten they were there before they got up and took their plates to the sink.

Grey gulped.

Gus held the lantern up in front of him. "I've stacked some wood on the porch, it should be enough to get you two through the night."

"You'll have to get some more in the morning. And there are beds, I've left fresh linens on the chair by the door."

Grey nodded.

He still felt uncertain, but Gus had offered them the use of a guest cabin on his land. The rancher had even provided them with the comfort of a warm fire and a hot meal.

Ava was walking along with a small basket in her hands, which contained some bread and a jar of jam that Gus had sent with them.

A snack, in case they found themselves hungry. Gus had noticed how malnourished they were and insisted on sending it along.

"Thank you, sir." Ava beamed with pride.

Grey couldn't blame her for being proud of herself, but he still felt uncomfortable about this entire ordeal. It was all so strange. He wasn't used to being trusted.

He was a bandit, a bad man. He hadn't ever killed anyone, but members of his gang had been the cause of deaths. He'd sat back and let it happen in the past.

Whether or not they went out of their way to kill people didn't matter. Their victims were killed because they fought against being robbed, but they were killed all the same.

"Thank you." Grey said, and he really meant it. "You didn't have to do this for us."

"Well, it's not much, but it's the right thing to do. You two need help."

"We're not that bad off." Ava shook her head.

"I'm just looking for work for a short while. I've written a letter to my family to send money. We shouldn't be in your hair for too long."

"Oh, I don't mind the company and the help. I won't lie, I can use it. And if I can turn someone's life around while I do, I might be able to honor my beautiful Cecilia."

Ava's smile turned sad. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, casting her eyes toward the ground. Grey stayed silent out of respect.

No one said much of anything until they managed to get into the cabin.

Gus excused himself, leaving Grey and Ava alone.

Grey breathed a sigh of relief to see two beds in the room. "Look, that's good." He nodded.

Ava walked inside. "We should get the fire started."

Grey carried another load of wood into the cabin, placing it next to the small wood stove. "You did a good job. This is a nice place to stay."

"You helped. I'm sure having a strong man around was hard for him to resist." Ava laughed, waving it off.

“A nanny helps, too.”

“I’m not trying to be a nanny.”

“I don’t know how useful Italian would be for these kids.” Grey shrugged.

“I mean, if they are able to use the language, that’s wonderful, but it’s not something they need as ranchers.”

“Well, those are the only skills I have.” Ava opened the wood stove and started piling in some logs. “I don’t have a lot that would be useful on a ranch.”

“I’m sure we could find you something.” Grey offered a smile, then decided to change the subject. “So, which bed do you want?”

She turned and looked at the beds. “I should get them made.”

“You don’t have to make my bed. You’re lighting the fire.”

“I’m just loading the stove first. I don’t want to be cold tonight.” Ava smiled.

“I’ll get that if you get the beds.”

Ava looked grateful as she picked herself up and started to change out the old, dusty sheets that had been on the bed for the clean fresh ones.

“This is going to be just lovely. I didn’t know how much I missed sleeping in a building on a bed before we got here.” She laughed.

Grey chuckled softly, shaking his head as he took his spot to light the fire in the wood stove. “It’s going to be the first warm night in ages.”

“It feels so strange to be sleeping indoors. It’s different, somehow, with you here.” Ava shifted positions so her back was to him.

“Why?”

She shrugged, looking down at her feet. “I don’t know. I suppose this entire thing feels more formal somehow?”

Grey laughed. “Do you think that might be because you called me your husband?”

They finished getting the small cabin ready and crawled into their separate beds. They were exhausted from the journey, but Grey couldn't sleep.

He tossed and turned for a while. It had been a long time since he had been in a bed. Even with the gang, he slept most of the time in a bedroll in his tent.

Sometimes he would have a bed, but it wasn't often.

But their new situation was nothing like that. Their host had provided them with a space of their own in exchange for their hard work.

He honestly couldn't believe life could ever be like this. He had never been told it was possible to see this kind of human kindness.

He hadn't been forced to prove himself first or anything. He could hurt this family or rob them, or be terrible at his job, and it didn't matter. They had a place to sleep that night.

They would be safe and warm. Ava had done all of this.

He rubbed his face and rolled over, trying desperately to sleep. There would be hard work in the coming days.

Grey would be expected to keep up with a man who had worked hard on a ranch every day. The prospect frightened him a little.

He felt certain he was going to fail and end up with them kicked off the land. He had to be able to rest.

But sleep didn't come to Grey. His mind raced over his past. He wondered about all the things he had given up just to help Ava.

And he didn't know what would come of any of this once she left.

He'd fought for her, given up his family for her, and she was going to leave as soon as her father responded to that letter she had sent out.

He waited until Ava was asleep and slipped out of bed. There was a single room in the cabin, just one space that they shared.

He didn't want to risk waking her. The woman deserved to get some sleep.

He padded over to the wood stove and sat next to it. The fire raged. It was peaceful to stare into the warmth it offered. He knew he hadn't done anything to earn any of this.

He was so trapped in self-loathing that it took him a minute to notice the hand on his shoulder.

Ava was there. She stood there, looking at him. There was concern in her eyes, a look that made Grey feel worse about what he was suffering through.

He didn't like the pity that painted her face. Her life should be so much better than what she was having to live with.

What she needed was a knowledge that haunted him, he felt terrible when he thought about burdening her with the problems and pain that plagued them both.

They had spoken about it, shared their pain, grown close. He had learned so much about her, teaching her about his world, and she had taught him about hers.

They had come together to become better people. The realization felt strange.

Grey choked, his breath trying to escape his chest faster than his throat would let it. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't wake me." In the light of the fire, she looked like an angel.

He shivered. "I just had some trouble sleeping."

"It's all right. This is all so new to me, too. I couldn't sleep, either."

"Are you worried about this?"

"If I'm honest, a little bit, but you seem like you're more worried than I am."

Grey bit his lip. He didn't know what to say to her. There was no way to explain everything he had lived through. He couldn't tell those stories in a million years.

Ava was such a sweet and wonderful woman. She was dynamic and bright.

And he was nothing. He was a bandit trying to be a rancher. His life had fallen apart at such a young age and he never knew anything different than what he had always been.

He could feel her watching as the tears started to fall down his cheeks.

She reached up and brushed one of his tears away.

He sniffled. "You don't have to worry about me."

"I'm going to worry. I just want to help you. I want you to have a good life."

"I'll never have a good life. I don't deserve it. All I've ever known is taking from people. I don't know how to work hard or earn my keep or anything. I can't even read."

She didn't say anything. Instead, she wrapped her warm arms around and let him lean into her shoulder. Grey cried, the tears pouring out of him.

"I left everything behind," Grey wailed, sobbing uncontrollably onto her shoulder.

"It's all right. You can let it out."

Grey shook his head. He was trying to pull it all back in and get himself back to the right state. He wanted to be strong for Ava.

She was his wife, or at least pretending to be. Ava was a good woman and would still need him for quite a while.

As he thought about all of this, the tears started to fall more freely down his cheeks. He was letting it all out, and the tears didn't feel like it would ever stop.

Ava stood firm, offering her comfort without saying too much.

If he had more sense about him, he would have worried that Gus would overhear his sobs, but he didn't pay any attention to that at the moment.

What mattered was the shattering loneliness that had consumed every bit of his being. He had lost everything.

He ranted and raved at Ava, talking about how much it hurt and how much he had given up. The words came out in random jumbles, tumbling over each other in an attempt to escape.

He told her things he had never told another person. He spoke about how Bart had become a father to him.

He spoke about the fact that no one had cared about education, this was the West. It was more useful to ride a horse than read a book. He sniffled and cried.



Ava just let him talk. She didn't say much. She didn't have to. She was just there, supporting him through the break of his façade.

He continued until he had released all the fear that had followed him since his idyllic childhood had been shattered.

He cried about having lost everyone that had ever cared about him. He sobbed about how he had given it all up just to help Ava, and that being a good man should never have put him in this position.

She comforted him, rubbing his back while he hiccuped from crying so hard. The tears were ugly and violent, spilling forward in uncontrollable bursts.

He didn't want it to stop. He didn't want to face the world after he had said so many things he wouldn't be able to hide again once it was all over.

He had no idea what she thought about any of what he said.

He wanted to ask, but he couldn't find those words, even if he had put every other bit of his pain out into the world for her to hear.

He sobbed until he fell asleep.

The days flew by for Ava. After that first night, She and Grey fell into a comfortable routine. She tried to cook him breakfast the first day, and it was terrible.

He ate it anyway, choking the food down and telling her how good it was.

It made her laugh, and every morning it had gotten a little better. Grey helped her when he had the chance to stop and provide support, but the work had to keep going.

Grey spent every day in the fields, learning the ins and outs of ranching, and Ava spent her time caring for the children, teaching them lessons.

The children weren't going to school because they had just lost their mother, and Ava had the job to keep them up to date with the assignments that had been sent home from the small schoolhouse.

She taught reading and writing, science and arithmetic. The children were quiet and sad. It broke her heart to see the children in such a state.

They didn't deserve to live with the grief they were obviously suffering from.

Ava had had no idea before this how difficult it could be to handle children. She had heard tales, but had always assumed that mothers

were exaggerating.

It was when she helped teach two troubled children that she realized how wrong she was. It was difficult to get them to focus.

She spent the day doing chores and working on studies and then preparing for dinner. She wasn't a good cook, so Gus took care of that most of the time, but she could at least get everything ready for him to start dinner when he came in from the fields.

These weeks had been the happiest of her life. Grey had struggled a bit, but Ava felt freer than she had ever been.

It was a foreign concept, being able to pursue anything that she wished to with just a lot of hard work.

She spent her evenings sitting with Grey by the fire. They read books. Well, Ava read books to Grey.

He smiled as she read, leaning back against the wall while he sat in his bed.

She sat on her own bed, reading to Grey. Grey was hanging onto every bit of the story, asking questions and encouraging her to read more and more.

It made her smile to realize how excited he was.

It took almost three weeks for Grey to ask for something more of the relationship they shared.

She had been reading to him and he was listening along. Then he stopped and looked at her. Ava noticed the odd look on his face and stopped reading, turning to him.

"Is there something wrong with the story?"

"No, nothing. I was just wondering if I could learn to read."

Ava smiled at him. “You absolutely could. I would love to teach you.”

He gave a giddy grin. “Really?”

“Of course, you didn’t think I would refuse, did you? After everything we’ve been through?”

He tilted his head, glancing towards the ceiling. “I guess I never really thought about it. I know you plan to leave soon. I didn’t want to make you feel obligated to me.”

She nodded and moved over to sit on his bed next to him.

Grey got up.

Ava frowned. It felt like he was rejecting her right away. She wasn’t going to push anything on him, but he seemed to be so uncomfortable with her being that close.

“I need to show you the pages,” she explained.

“I want to put more wood on the fire before we get started.” He gave an embarrassed sigh.

“Oh, I didn’t realize the fire was getting low.”

“Well, it’s not yet, but once we start I don’t want to have to keep getting up.”

Ava let him walk away. She wasn’t sure how much she believed that and moved back to sit on her own bed just to be certain.

It was a pleasant surprise when Grey came to sit down right next to her. She looked into his eyes; they were happy.

He leaned back, making sure to maintain an appropriate distance. “Where do we start?”

“Probably with the basics.” Ava laughed. “How much do you know already?”

“I don’t really remember any of it.” He frowned. “I think I might know the alphabet.”

She considered for a moment, then reached down next to the bed for the most basic school primer. It was an older one that Gus’s kids had long outgrown, but she had found it around the house and Gus had let her keep it.

Now she had a use for it.

It would be a lie if she said she hadn’t been hoping he would ask her for help. The fact that he wasn’t able to read had been on her mind since he had admitted it to her.

She pulled out the book and they started slowly, sounding out words together and exploring how the letters fit into words and created language.

It was a slow process, more so since Grey was older and had never learned when he was a child. His mind was already set in its ways.

In some ways, she felt like she had to be more patient with him than she had to be with the children, who were like sponges for information even if they didn’t appreciate it the same way that Grey did.

Grey grew steadily more excited as they worked, keeping at it for more than an hour before he yawned.

Ava smiled at him. “Are you ready to stop for the night?”

“Can we try this again tomorrow?”

“Of course we can.” Ava nodded. “I wouldn’t just give you one lesson then quit.”

“I didn’t think you would. Unless I drove you crazy.”

“Even if you drove me crazy, I wouldn’t stop teaching you. You’re a smart man, and you can read if you want to.”

Grey smiled. “What about you? What are you going to do when your father sends that money your way?”

“I’m probably going to head to California. It’s what I’m expected to do.” Ava didn’t want to go, but she also didn’t know of any better options.

She was already promised to Charles Leighton and it would be a bad idea to do anything else. She sighed, knowing that this was going to happen again and again.

Grey would keep asking. Ava didn’t have the answers he wanted.

“You know you don’t have to go to California, right?”

“What would you have me do?”

Grey glanced down at his hands. “Would you consider staying? Maybe doing something else with your life? You could start perfuming.”

Ava gave a sad smile. “I wish I could, but I don’t have any training.”

“You could learn. You could teach yourself. We could even go to a bigger city and get you the training. It would be fine.”

She smiled softly. The sentiment was sweet, but she wasn’t sure what she could do about any of these ideas.

They seemed so tempting, but it didn’t feel right to take her father’s money and use it to finance her dreams instead of heading to California.

She thought about the letter she had sent. She knew she wouldn’t be

able to stay here forever, but it was nice for now.

These would be the memories she would hold onto for the rest of her life. Grey would be on her mind a lot, and nothing would take his kindness from her heart.

She loved him for that.

The thought caught her by surprise. She almost jumped off the bed when she realized the thought that had just crossed her mind.

It was that word. That simple little word. But it meant so much more than she'd ever thought it could.

She smiled at Grey. "Let's just get back to the lesson. We can figure that out later."

He looked disappointed. "Maybe we should just get some sleep."

Embarrassed, she looked away. She had said the wrong thing.

It always felt like the wrong thing. They had almost shared a moment and she had tossed it all away just to continue being non-committal about her future.

She sighed and decided to pursue the conversation. "I don't know what to do yet. I'm still trying to make the decision."

"You have time. But whenever it comes up, you act like you're just going to do what they expect from you."

She curled up, hugging her legs.

Grey nodded slowly. "What do *you* want?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "I just want to do the right thing, but they both feel like they're the right thing. If I stayed, I would lose my family. They're still my family."

Grey swallowed. "I understand. It's hard to let go of stuff like that. It was hard when I did it, but sometimes you just have to do what's right."

"Thank you." Ava nodded. "But I think I just want to get some sleep now."

Grey got up and walked over to his bed, leaving her alone with her thoughts.



Grey could have jumped out of bed. It had been a month of working at the ranch and he had gotten used to the hard labor. He was no longer sore every morning.

Instead, he was excited to get out and deal with the animals and do all the hauling of feed and bedding. Gus had been training him and now he was learning to repair fences for the older man.

Ava had breakfast on the stove. Eggs and coffee. It wasn't burnt this time.

"You're getting better." Grey grinned.

"We all have things to learn." She laughed.

"I'll be back for reading lessons this evening." Grey couldn't help but notice that she looked so beautiful as she pattered around the house.

He had to stop himself from mentioning it every time she served him breakfast, no matter how bad the cooking was. She was learning.

"You had better be. You're learning so fast."

"I have a good teacher."

Ava shook her head. "It's not because of my teaching. You're really smart."

“There’s a difference between intelligence and education. You’re intelligent, but you didn’t have access to education.”

She put the eggs on a biscuit and poured him a cup of coffee.

Grey thought about it for a second. “I think I need to tell Gus.”

“Are you sure?” Ava looked concerned.

“I’m sure. I need to tell him what I used to be. I can’t keep living this lie. I want to keep ranching, and to do that, I need to tell people that truth.”

Ava chewed on her lip. She was still holding out the biscuit and coffee Grey hadn’t taken from her hand yet. “If you think it’s for the best.”

“What do you think?”

She sighed heavily. “I’m not sure. It’s risky, but it’s the right thing to do. Are you going to tell them that we’re not married?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want you to get into any trouble.”

“If you want to, you can tell him that, too. Just let me know before I get kicked out of here if that happens.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Have a good day out there.” Ava leaned in like she was going to kiss his cheek, but then pulled back. It was hard to decide what he should do about that.

Should he have leaned in, as well? He didn’t know. Instead, he reached awkwardly toward her outstretched hands.

Grey took the offered meal, redness climbing up his cheeks as blood rushed to his face. “I need to get to work.”

Ava grinned at him. "I'll see you tonight?"

"Maybe for lunch, if I'm close to the house." This moment felt perfect.

He walked out to the fields and met Gus. They were quickly on horseback and riding out to check out the pasture fences.

As they rode, Gus said, "You've come far."

Grey nodded. "Thank you for giving me a chance. It means so much to both of us. Ava is thriving here. It's nice to see her so happy."

"You both look happy," The older man pointed out.

Gus wasn't that old, but to Grey, the rancher was a font of wisdom. He had struggled, but the man still seemed to have everything together.

Gus didn't try to hide the sad smile that played across his face then. Grey didn't blame him for that — he had lost so much. Instead, he looked to the man for advice.

There wouldn't be a better time to tell the man the truth.

"I was hoping to talk to you."

"You can talk to me about anything." Gus rode on. He didn't seem to be taking it very seriously.

Grey gulped. "I know it's wrong to lie."

"That's an ominous start." Gus frowned, slowing down as they followed the fence. "What is all of this about? Are you lying to Ava?"

"I'm not lying to Ava." Grey was fast to deny that. A little too fast. He realized it probably made him look guilty. He cursed himself silently. "That's not what this is about."

"I assume you've been lying about something, though?" Gus looked at

him.

Grey felt like he was being judged. It was very uncomfortable. He tried to make himself as small as possible, leaning back away from Gus.

More worries plagued Grey's mind. The doubts were ever-present, unstoppable, but there was something behind it all. There was no doubt that this could all go terribly.

Gus could make them both leave.

If that happened, Ava would end up homeless again. He would be fine if he made himself homeless, but Ava was finally getting comfortable.

He considered coming up with some sort of lie, something that would make Gus stop asking questions. But he had hope behind all the fears.

Grey couldn't keep this secret forever. He had to do the right thing. He wouldn't be able to make a better life for himself and Ava if they started with a lie.

He sighed. "I lied to you."

"What did you lie to me about?" Gus didn't sound that worried yet.

Grey knew that was going to change. He swallowed hard. "I suppose I lied about my past. I should have told you the truth, but I wasn't sure what to do about it."

"What's the problem? It couldn't be so bad, could it?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Well." Gus slowed his horse down again, carefully examining a weak portion of the fence. "I've found that many people have trouble telling what's actually a problem and what's not."

“What?”

“I’m saying it may not be as bad as you think it is.”

Grey shook his head. “This isn’t one of those problems. I’m sorry.”

“Well, then, what is it?” Gus climbed off his horse.

Grey followed suit. There was a part of the fence that needed repair.

That was more important than this conversation. They had to get it fixed before one of the cows decided to make a break for it.

It gave him a couple seconds to get his head on straight. He held the poles while Gus hammered the nails into the wood.

“I’ll understand if you want us to leave, but I’d be grateful if you let Ava stay. She doesn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“You don’t have anywhere else to go, either.” Gus shook his head. He was talking around the nails in his mouth.

“That doesn’t matter. I can make it by myself if I have to.”

“Why don’t you just say it?”

Grey drew in a shaky breath. “Look, I’m sorry. I know it’s wrong and I was shady about my past.”

“I figured it was just something you don’t want to talk about.” Gus shrugged. “We all have things we don’t want to talk about.”

“It’s not that easy. I used to do some... less-than-savory things.”

“What kind of less-than-savory things?” Gus paused and leaned against the almost repaired fence.

“I was a train robber. We rustled cattle. We did all kinds of terrible

things.”

“I know,” Gus said.

Grey blinked. “What? You knew? How?”

Gus chuckled softly. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

“No? Should I?”

“I suppose all the people you rob kind of run together after a while.” Gus was smiling now. “I’m sorry about not telling you about it earlier, but I saw you working to improve your life.”

“You knew and still hired me?”

“Everyone is allowed to turn their life around.” Gus shrugged.

“How did you know that I’m not here to try to rob you?” Grey’s hands were trembling. He wasn’t sure what to think.

“I could tell it in your face. You were so worried about everything, and then you worked so hard to prove yourself.”

“Oh, I see.” He was going to have to take some time to think about what Gus was saying.

“And you’ve gotten yourself a pretty wife that loves you.”

Grey stopped being able to think about anything else. “Loves me?”

Gus tilted his head. “She’s your wife, of course she loves you.

“You should see the look on her face when she thinks you’re not looking. She looks at you like you hung the moon.”

“Hung the moon?” Grey felt like he should be saying something more intelligent, but this entire conversation felt like it had been turned on

his ear. The shock was making him unable to think straight.

All of this information was just too much. It didn't make sense at all.

Ava couldn't love him, could she? He didn't know how Ava felt about him. She played her cards close to her chest.

He swallowed hard. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For the opportunity."

Grey meant it. Gus had changed his life. Ava had changed his life. It was a lesson that he never knew he needed to learn.

People weren't all out to hurt him, and they cared. Kind people wanted to help others.

He had hurt both Ava and Gus and they were still trying to help him turn around his life.

Bart had always told him that no one would care about a bandit once they weren't a bandit anymore. They would put him to death if they found out who he was.

But all of that was a lie. Grey felt as if his reality had just been broken into a thousand pieces around him. Everything he knew was false. Certainty was gone.

Still, the truth had a sort of freeing quality to it.

People would help him up. He wondered how different his life would have been if he had found someone like Gus instead of Bart when his parents had died.

Maybe his entire life wouldn't have been a lie.

He shivered, picturing Ava. She meant the world to him.

He knew he cared about her, but did he love her? It was hard for him to figure out the answer to that question. It just felt so odd to deal with.

He had a long moment of silence as the thoughts started to sink in.

“Something wrong?” Gus asked.

Grey shook his head. He didn’t know how to explain it, but all of this had taught him something. Maybe he did deserve happiness.

He couldn’t explain how or why, but it just felt so right.

Ava felt right. He deserved happiness. Ava did, too.

He could help make that happen.

But Gus was waiting for some sort of response. He had to say something to the man before he ended up looking like a gobsmacked fool. “Uh, thank you?”

Gus laughed. “No need to thank me.”

Grey almost said something that gave the lie away, then stopped himself. “I guess I never realized just how strongly she felt about me before.”

“I can’t say that I blame you, a lot of young men go through that.”

“Did you?”

Gus nodded. “It was hard to know what I wanted when I first met my wife.” The rancher got a sad look on his face when he mentioned his wife.

Grey fell into a moment of silence. He couldn’t imagine how it would



feel to lose Ava. He had always pushed it aside whenever he had thought about her leaving.

That was what made him know that he had to tell Ava how he felt.

Maybe this sham marriage could stop being a sham. He knew how he felt, and there was always a chance that they could be something more.

He just had to find the strength to take that chance.

**A**va carried all the dishes to the wash basin. She was already feeling tired; the day had been long and she wasn't looking forward to cleaning up after dinner.

But she knew that the men worked hard out in the fields and were likely more physically exhausted than she was having taken care of the kids.

Usually Gus took care of the dishes, but today Ava thought that she would help.

It felt good to help. She wasn't good at chores, but learning had been fun. She had done things that she never knew she was capable of.

Ava felt like she was finally living.

Gus had gotten a good laugh at her first attempt to wash dishes weeks ago. Water had gotten everywhere.

She had to admit that she would have found it amusing if she had been watching someone else struggle with it. In fact, it was quickly becoming something that she could laugh at herself doing.

It had been a hit to her pride originally, but she hadn't let that stop her from trying again. She was learning the ins and outs of taking care of a home, and Gus was patient with her as she learned the chores.

She smiled as she worked, slowly getting the feel of the process. Ava

still spilled far too much water around the living room.

Grey walked into the kitchen. "Need some help?"

Ava shook her head. "No, I'm doing just fine. I think I've finally got this down."

He shrugged. "I guess I just want to get out of here a little faster."

"You can head back to the cabin without me."

"It's already dark, I don't want you walking back there alone."

She sighed. "I've done it before."

"I know you have, but I can be a gentleman at least once, can't I?"

"You can."

"Well, then, let's just leave it at that."

"I owe you all the thanks in the world for the past month," she mumbled.

"What was that?" She repeated it, and he offered a soft smile. "It was a pleasure. Now, can I help you with those dishes?"

She nodded in agreement, moving to the side so he could dry and put things away.

He shifted into position quickly and they made short work of the mess from supper.

She was happy to be working with another adult. Spending all day with children had been a little stressful.

After the dishes were done and put away, he turned to her.

There was something about the way that he looked at her. It made her shiver. Something important was on his mind.

He was silent for a long time, just standing there in the kitchen with his eyes on her face.

She fidgeted nervously, shifting her weight from foot to foot, unsure of what to say. “Uh, is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong.” He shook his head. “I guess I just wanted to talk to you. Do you mind stepping outside with me?”

Grey sounded so earnest that it almost hid the slight waver in his voice, like he was doubting himself. She had no idea what would make him act so oddly.

He seemed so stiff and awkward. Her lips tugged down into a frown; she really didn’t know how to respond at first.

Grey leaned back, nearly turning away. “It doesn’t matter, you know, it’s fine if you don’t want to go outside with me.”

“No, I didn’t say that. I would love to,” Ava said quickly. “I mean, we have to go back to the cabin anyway.”

He nodded. “I was hoping we could make a detour on the way.”

“Where?”

“You’ll see.” He glanced down at his hands for a moment. It was a nervous gesture. Ava seemed to bring that out in him.

“I just wanted to talk to you about something important.”

She chewed on her lip. It felt like it was going to be another discussion about the future. There were no more answers out there for her.

She was getting attached to this life, but there were people counting on her to do what was expected of her.

Mind racing, she nodded. The man probably wanted answers she didn't have.

Ava wanted to stay, but she didn't know if she could really live without the kindness of her father and future husband. They had paid for everything in her life.

The truth was that she didn't really know what she was doing here, just feeling her way through the motions of this life. She was never raised to work hard and it strained her.

Would she be willing to let go of it all? It would mean letting go of her old life forever.

She envied Grey for being able to make that decision so easily; whenever she thought about it, it filled her with trepidation.

Ava kept trying to convince herself that she didn't want this life, that all she wanted to do was help Grey get settled into a new life without having to steal in order to eat.

She had to do right by the man who had saved her.

She sighed heavily and nodded. He put his arm out for her to take. It was a strange gesture coming from him, taking her back slightly.

"Let's go for a small walk on the way to the cabin."

"I don't mind that. A walk sounds lovely." She let him lead her out of the house and toward a small copse of trees near the fields.

It was out of the way, but when she saw the campfire lit out there she couldn't help but gasp.

The small area looked absolutely lovely. Oil lamps hung from the

trees, looking like large fireflies hanging off the low branches.

The sight was romantic, with a small blanket laid right by the fire.

“When did you do this?”

“While you started the dishes.”

“You couldn’t have been gone that long.” Ava shook her head.

He laughed slightly. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

She couldn’t help but smile. This was the nicest surprise anyone had ever given her, a romantic night by a fire.

He led her to sit down on the blanket by the fire. She perched herself there, waiting for whatever else he had planned for her.

Grey checked on the fire, shifting the logs to get it going a little bit brighter before he spoke. “I’ve been doing some thinking lately.”

“About what?”

“About the future.”

“You want something else? Maybe a different job?” Ava tilted her head.

“No, nothing like that. I was thinking about our future.”

It felt like there was a stone in her stomach. He had referred to it as something they would share.

Her dreams started to play out: a peaceful life, running a business or working on a ranch. The pictures danced in her head.

Grey wanted to talk about all of that.

She didn't know what to say. Her mouth was dry, and her breathing turned shallow. It was hard to focus. Finally, she managed to squeak out two words. "About what?"

"The future. I want to spend it with you. I know it isn't ideal, but I want to see you live your dreams — and I want to be right there when you do it."

Her heart started to thud in her chest. She didn't know what to say.

It was everything she wanted to hear, at least from deep in her heart, but she had always known that wild dreams weren't the answer to anything in life.

Sacrifices had to be made, and sometimes it hurt, but it was worth it for success. That was what she had been taught. That was what her family believed in.

Her father would never accept Grey. It would mean letting go of her entire life. She would lose the money and all of her friends and family.

But Grey had given up the same things for her. He had done it before he had even known her.

Her family wasn't built out of criminality, at least as far as she knew. Her father could be shady when he felt the need to be, but as far as she knew nothing about his business activities had broken the law.

She sighed.

Grey frowned. "I know you need some time to think, but I want you to consider it.

"We could save up and get you in a little perfume store somewhere. Or we can work at a ranch and someday buy our own."

"Those are some interesting plans."

“You don’t need to agree right now, but I know what I want. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“What makes you say that?” Ava felt like it was the wrong thing to say, but she had to say something.

Grey drew in a deep breath. She felt her nerves bundle up and her stomach was in knots. It felt so strange to hear those words from Grey.

It was so tempting.

But she still didn’t know how to answer. She was a little scared of what it might mean. The changes would be immense.

Things had already changed in her short time living like this. She loved this life, even if she didn’t know how to work as hard as the others here did.

Even the children were better at all this than she was.

And there was nothing to say that she would ever get any better.

Ava chewed on her lip as she considered what Grey was telling her. Her thoughts were a jumbled mess, rushing into every possible way his plans could go wrong.

But did she love Grey? She did. There was no way to deny that fact, not to her heart. It was a feeling that would last the rest of her life.

Even if she went on to that life her father had planned for her, it wouldn’t change anything. She wanted to stay with Grey.

There would be regrets no matter what direction she chose. Before she could make up her mind, Grey’s head snapped up.

He had heard it first, the soft lowing of cattle, and the movement of large animals out in the fields. This was beyond the normal sounds of the farm.



Someone was moving the animals. They were trying to do it quietly, but it wasn't quiet enough for how close they were to the fields.

Ava felt dread settle into the pit of her stomach. Gus wouldn't be doing that, and if he was the one causing the ruckus, he wouldn't care about trying to be quiet.

Something else was going on.

Grey jumped up, ready to run. Then, he looked at Ava.

She nodded at him. "Go!" she whispered harshly. It was all that needed to be said.

**A**va saw Grey start to head out, but then he stopped and turned around to look at her.

“Go to the house,” he said. “Get Gus. If I go, they could get away before we get out there.” He frowned. “These kinds of jobs move fast for a reason.”

She hated hearing him talk about the world of thieves with such confidence. It only served to remind her of the life that he used to live.

She had been able to forget that for a while on this ranch, but this conversation just forced reality right back into her face.

“Maybe you shouldn’t go without Gus.”

“I’ll be fine.” Grey’s assurances weren’t very assuring.

She wanted to grab him and make him stay. She wanted to tell him to come with her. They could go as a group. She had to stop herself from doing that.

Instead, she reached out and put her hand on his arm before he could get too far away. “Don’t go alone.”

“I’m just going to go scout a little bit. Go get Gus.” Grey shook his head.

“I’m not letting you go alone.” She stomped her foot.

“I can’t let you go with me. I have to keep you safe.” Grey’s face looked pained in the firelight. It broke her heart to see his agony.

“Please, just listen to me. Go to Gus. I’ll be fine. I promise.”

Ava knew what he wasn’t saying. He was worried he would end up having to look after her. She felt the same worry, but she wanted to help him.

If he got into trouble, it would leave her heartbroken. They had just started to figure out their feelings.

This man was special to her. He would always be special to her. There was nothing that could take that away.

In that moment, she knew how much she loved him and that she didn’t want to let him go. But she had to. He couldn’t do his job if he was stuck worrying about her.

He was a good man. Grey wanted to protect people. He wouldn’t be happy if she got hurt because he hadn’t been able to protect her.

But she wasn’t sure she wanted to just sit back and count on him to do so.

Either way, Gus had to be informed of the situation. And she needed to do it.

She reached her hand out to Grey. “Stay safe.”

“I will. I promise.” He swept back to kiss her on the cheek. “Don’t worry.”

“I’m going to worry until you come back safely.”

He smiled. “I know my way around thieves. You don’t need to worry.

I'll be safe."

She frowned, not quite sure she believed him in regards to his own safety. He rushed out of her sight anyway, slipping through the line of trees between their romantic spot and the fields.

Ava knew that she had to move quickly and move around the noises. Cattle were being rustled. She knew it. It was terrifying, but Ava had felt that kind of terror before.

It had been the moment that had set her on this grand adventure. This time, she wasn't as scared as she had been before.

She snuck through the darkness, following the fence of the pasture around the long way and trying not to make too much noise as she made her way through the ranch and over to the house.

She managed to keep out of sight as she crept up to the front door and into the house.

Gus looked up from where he was sitting by the fire and reading a newspaper. There was a set of reading glasses on his nose. It made him look older.

The man was only in his late thirties, but with those glasses he looked closer to fifty in the fading firelight. "Did you forget something?"

Ava shook her head. She was still a bit out of breath. "No, but something's going on outside."

"What is it?"

"We heard someone trying to steal the cattle." She managed to squeak it out.

Her mind was reeling. She wanted to help. She had used a firearm as a girl, having trained in shooting, but she had no experience in a shootout.

She wasn't a warrior.

Gus was getting up and gathering a gun.

She had to ask. It was now or never. "Can I have a gun, too?"

"Do you know how to use one?"

She nodded. "At least a little bit. I won't accidentally shoot myself."

"That's not very comforting." Gus frowned, strapping on his gun belt.

"I can shoot. I've never shot anything but targets, but I can handle a gun." She tried not to fidget as she explained it to Gus. There wasn't much time to go into detail.

He seemed to believe her and placed a single revolver on the table near her. "It's not much, but it's something. Stay in the house if you can."

"I will." She wasn't sure if she actually would, but if it got Gus moving a little faster, she was happier.

Grey was out there alone and she had to try to do something to help. The man deserved all the help he could get.

She couldn't lose him, not now. She had to keep fighting.

She moved to follow Gus out, but Gus turned around. He had his shoulders squared. "I told you to stay here at the house. It's not safe for you out there."

"It's not safe for anyone." She snorted. "I'm going, and you don't have the time to argue with me."

"It's a bad idea. You don't know anything about this."

"I know that Grey's out there." She was begging. She hated the sound

of her voice when she said it, but she could only hope that it got her point across.

It all felt so wrong, like her entire world was at risk of shattering.

It was odd how this ranch and Grey had become so important to her that she was willing to risk her own life to keep him safe, but she couldn't picture herself without him.

She would have to dissect those feelings later, but maybe Grey had been right when he made that offer. She did care for him. She wanted to see him again.

The thought of something tearing them apart was the worst thing she could imagine.

"If something happens to you, Grey will fall apart," Gus warned her.

"I know. Nothing's going to happen to me. And if something happened to Grey, I don't know what I would do. I owe him everything. I couldn't live without him.

"If I can help him, I need to be there helping. You can't tell me you wouldn't have done the same for your wife." It was a dirty trick, but she felt the need to do it.

Gus was just going to keep fighting with her. She probably should be staying back, but she had the need to be a part of the action.

"What about the children?"

"We won't be going that far. We can rush back."

Gus looked like he was going to argue more with her, but Ava took the lead, starting to stomp toward the pasture.

"Horses," Gus instructed, pointing the opposite direction from where Ava was heading.

“Right, horses.” Ava turned to the barn. She felt a little embarrassed that she hadn’t thought about horses. Her cheeks flushed, but she hid her face away from Gus.

Gus quickly took the lead, running at full speed toward the barn. He kept low, trying to stay out of sight. Ava had to hike up her skirts to move silently.

Gus led two horses out the front door and she rushed up to close the doors to prevent any other animals from getting out.

“Good thinking.”

“Thanks.” She nodded and turned to slide onto the horse. There was no saddle.

It didn’t take them long to head off into the dark night, looking for whatever their new goal would be. She wasn’t sure if this was the right choice, but it felt like what she should be doing.

Grey wasn’t the only one that could do the saving. She could protect him, too. Right now he was out there without a weapon, hunting down some cattle thieves.

The robbers probably had guns and knives. Grey had been planning a romantic evening, one that didn’t involve guns, so he hadn’t worn it. Had he?

She honestly didn’t remember. She had been so caught in his eyes that she hadn’t paid much attention to what he was wearing.

And he had said the most amazing things. She regretted not telling him how she felt. She couldn’t lose him now. She had to help.

And as she rode a few strides behind Gus, she readied her nerves for whatever happened to be coming for them.

“There may be a fight,” Gus warned her again. “Are you sure you

don't want to turn around? It's not a bad thing to run away from trouble."

"I know, but it's also okay to stand up for myself."

He frowned. "But this isn't about yourself."

"You're right." She nodded. "This is about Grey. I don't want him to get hurt when I can help prevent it."

"Let's hope they just leave on their own."

"Without the cattle."

"Yeah, without the cattle." Gus had determination in his voice.

She could tell Gus didn't think it would be that simple. She set her shoulders and shifted on horseback.

She hadn't had much practice riding without gear, so she felt unsteady.

While she rode, she checked the weapon, making sure it was loaded. It was.

"We'll be there in a second. Have your gun put together," Gus snapped at her.

Ava was struck with embarrassment. It wasn't going to take that long to get there. She had to just trust her weapon. She had to trust Gus. It was life or death.



Grey rushed through the night. He had learned the lay of the land early on while working with Gus. It let him navigate through the fields as quietly as possible.

He frowned when he realized just how many of the cattle were being rustled. This was a larger operation than most.

It was the kind of reckless job Bart would do, getting as much as he could before running with the goods.

Grey remembered all the jumping to and from trains and the cattle he had rustled in his life. This was exactly out of Bart's playbook.

And he remembered that Bart could kill if he had to. He didn't go out of his way to murder someone because that always got the law involved, but he wasn't afraid to do so if it got the job done.

The most important thing to Bart was getting away with the goods.

Grey was afraid of what he would do if he actually saw Bart there. He was terrified that he might just let Bart get away with whatever he wanted to do no matter what happened to his newfound family.

That would probably make Gus's mind up for him and the rancher would end up forcing Grey off the land, and Ava wouldn't go with him.

That was the most heartbreaking idea of all. He couldn't take Ava out

in the wilderness again with no hope for anything new.

He couldn't lead her into that life, no matter if she offered to go or not. No, he had made his decision. If they had to run and he could leave Ava here, he would.

She would be safer and her family would send money for her to go wherever she wanted soon.

He remembered promising Ava that he would be safe, but he had to do the right thing and try to save Gus' ranch. The man had taken Grey and Ava in, and he deserved better than to lose his entire livelihood.

Grey started to yell and wave his arms, trying to scare off the men on horses. It might not do much, but at least it would get their attention off of the cattle.

Then, he came face to face to the man on the lead horse.

He stopped in his tracks. It was Bart.

After all this time, Bart had found his way to this specific ranch.

It had to be a coincidence, but it didn't feel like one. It felt like fate was punishing him.

Bart turned and regarded Grey. Then, he rode closer.

Part of him wanted to run away, but his heart was thudding so loud he would be surprised if Bart couldn't hear it. He couldn't believe that this was happening to him.

Not right then. He had dreamed of freedom, and then Bart showed up.

Everything was falling apart. It was more than just his life on the line if he couldn't stand up to the past that held a threat against him.

He shivered, but did his best not to let it be shown. He didn't know

how well he managed to hide his trepidation.

As soon as the older bandit recognized his old protege, the man grinned.

“Look at you.”

Grey didn't know what to say. He stammered as he tried to find the right words, something that would make Bart go away.

Bart didn't back down. He motioned toward Grey again, impatiently. “Running at me, waving your arms like an old woman.”

Grey found his voice. Anger rose in his chest. He felt the urge to shout, his voice rising up in his throat.

“Look at me, yes. Maybe you should. And then you should turn around and leave.”

“Oh, I'm not leaving. You can't do anything about it, either.”

“You need to go,” Grey insisted, trying to stall.

Bart laughed.

Grey's face screwed up with rage. “Look, you don't belong here. The owner works hard every single day and he doesn't deserve to be robbed by you.”

Bart leaned in, his hand resting on the pommel of the saddle.

“Oh, you think you're in charge here? There are a lot more of us than there are of you, and we're going to take what we want.”

“Just go, the owner deserves better.”

“Are you honestly going straight? Or is this some kind of grift?” Bart didn't lose his smile.

“I’m not a criminal anymore.” Making the assertion brought Grey strength. It was surprisingly easy for him to say. And it just felt so right.

He was turning into the man he should have been all along. He knew Ava brought all of that out in him.

Bart snorted in laughter. “Right, keep talking like that. It makes you sound like a fool.”

Grey wanted to punch his old boss, but he was outnumbered and didn’t dare risk it. “Better to sound like a fool than actually be one.”

Bart’s face contorted to an expression of rage. “You’re going to pay for that.”

“There’s nothing you could do to me that would be worse than the damage you’ve already done,” Grey countered.

“I raised you,” Bart warned him.

“Yeah, and that’s the reason I haven’t told the law everything I know about the gang. I owe you all at least that much.”

Bart’s frown tightened. “Don’t you talk to me like that.”

“I’m sorry. I just want you to know that we can stop this and both go on our way.” Grey wasn’t great at bargaining, but it seemed like the only option.

“I don’t think we can.”

“Why can’t we?”

“Because whoever runs this place is going to want to know what happened to his cattle.”

“Then don’t take them. You don’t have to. You can just go somewhere

else.”

“We’re already committed to this job. And I don’t think we owe you any favors after you took off on us.”

“You left her to die.” Grey had to stop himself from screaming the words. “I couldn’t let that happen.”

“You could have and you should have.” Bart leaned against the pommel, pure rage in his eyes. Grey knew he was in trouble.

He wondered why Bart wasn’t just shooting him. There had to be something that made this powerful criminal stand down and just taunt Grey.

Maybe the man did actually feel something for the kid he had taken in. Grey didn’t know if he would be able to take advantage of that.

Bart wasn’t going to stop taunting him, though.

Grey glanced around, looking to see if Gus was on his way. The ranch owner wasn’t in sight yet. He hoped Ava had made it there.

If something had happened to her on the way, he would never forgive himself.

“Waiting for something?” Bart’s question was more of a threat than anything.

Grey felt a cold shiver run down his spine, but he made himself stay strong. “That’s none of your business.”

“No, but this cattle certainly is.”

Grey shook his head. “You aren’t going to take these cattle.”

“Little boy Grey has gone soft and now he’s trying to tell us how to live our lives.” Bart waved in his direction, then turned to the rest of

the men behind him. "Look who's gotten too good for us now."

"Just because you refuse to be better doesn't mean that I'm the bad guy." Grey frowned and shook his head. "I'm trying to turn my life around."

"No, you're right. You're not the bad guy. You're trying to be the good guy because you're lying to yourself. You're one of us. You'll always be one of us."

"You decided to run off with that girl from the train." Bart laughed. "Gone soft over a set of skirts."

"It isn't about her."

"Oh, really now? Why else would you leave your family behind?"

"I didn't want someone innocent to get hurt."

Bart laughed. "She wasn't innocent. She fought us."

"Those were her belongings." Grey took a step forward.

Bart wasn't intimidated by the show of strength. He just smirked. "Pretty sure that's not what it was. I saw her, she's a pretty young thing. Where are you keeping her?"

There was no way Grey was going to answer that. "It's not about that."

"It is about that." Bart motioned toward the house. "You saw a pretty skirt and you chased it. And you think that you can go straight, but we all know that it isn't true."

"It isn't who you are. Is she in the house?"

"No."

“I’m not sure I believe you.” Bart had the most insufferable look on his face. Grey just wanted to punch it.

Somehow, he managed to resist. Maybe it was the fact that it would be the stupidest action he could take at the moment. Or maybe it was fear.

He had always been afraid of Bart. The man wasn’t known for his pleasant moods when someone crossed him.

He looked down at his feet, trying to decide on the best course of action. Nothing that crossed his mind seemed to be guaranteed for success.

In fact, everything seemed like it would fail before he even started. The entire gang was watching him, waiting for him to make a move.

If he did, it would devolve into fighting, and there was no way Grey could take half a dozen men on horseback with weapons.

“Tell me, does the owner know what you used to do?”

“He knows, he’s just able to forgive and give me a chance.”

Bart started to laugh. “More like he’s biding his time until you stop being useful and then he’s going to turn you in.”

The words filled Grey with doubts. He had been afraid of Bart, but the thought of losing all of this caused him even more fear.

Bart didn’t relent. “Why don’t you just come home to your people, your real people?”

Grey didn’t want to leave the ranch. It had been easier to leave the bandits than it would be to leave here. Gus and Ava had become so important to him.

He couldn’t let them down. They were good people that tried to do

the right thing.

Bart would never be that type of man. He would never do the right thing.

He just wanted to make as much money as he could at the expense of people who actually worked hard for a living.

It was the only way Bart used to know to live, but he knew something better now. This was the life he wanted, and he was going to have to fight for it.

He knew Bart would probably kill him; there wasn't a lot of forgiveness in his old world, no matter how much Bart had put up with from him before.

"Just get out of here and I won't tell anyone I saw you."

"You wouldn't be able to find us, anyway."

Another voice called out from the crowd, "Boss, someone's coming."

Grey's head snapped to the side. Two horses were approaching.

Gus was on the lead one, but the back one — the person perched on the back of that animal made his heart sink.

Bart was watching, as well.

He couldn't warn them. There was no way to let them know without informing the gang, and that would likely lead to a fight they weren't going to be able to handle.

He couldn't believe Ava had come. He had told her to stay safe. She hadn't listened to a word of that.

Bart looked from the rancher and the woman Grey loved and back to Grey. His smile got wider. "What do we have here?"



“We should be getting out of here, Boss,” one of the guys in the background said.

“I know, but this is a new development. He actually cares about these two. Look at his face.”

Grey snapped. He didn’t like being angry, but he was. There was no stopping the rage that threatened to bubble over and make him do something stupider.

“You leave them alone.”

Bart turned back to Gus and raised an eyebrow. “I thought I taught you not to show your hand, boy.”

“Is that what you’re claiming you taught me?”

“You were never a good student.” Bart snorted.

“That’s because I’m a decent person.”

“Decent people don’t get ahead in this life.”

Grey frowned. If the situation had been different, he might have had a discussion about what Bart had just said.

He considered digging for a moment, but didn’t have long to ponder on what that statement meant before he had to say something. “It’s lazy people who don’t get ahead.”

“We both know that’s not true.”

“It’s not all luck.”

“A lot of it is. Life never did me any favors. It never did you any, either. That’s why you found me.”

“You found me. I didn’t find you. You found a kid, and then you

corrupted him.”

Bart laughed, turning over to regard the two people approaching from the direction of the house.

“Just deal with me. Leave them alone.” Grey hated begging, but it felt like the only option. He had to get Bart’s attention off of Gus and Ava.

Ava wasn’t slowing down. She was coming in right behind Gus. Grey cursed himself. She was here now and Bart was going to play his games with her.

“See, it seems you don’t have much choice in the matter.” Bart laughed. “Look at your new family. It would be a shame if something bad happened to them.”

“Don’t you dare.” Grey pursed his lips. He was trying not to show much emotion, but he couldn’t seem to do it right.

“Something wrong? Worried you’re going to lose your new family like you lost the last two?”

“I didn’t lose my last one. They left me behind.” Grey practically spat the words.

He didn’t know what to do about it. He didn’t know how he could fix this. Whatever Bart was going to do, he had the power to do.

He didn’t have a gun. He didn’t have a chance of putting a stop to this.

Bart had the men and the horses. Maybe Gus had a gun. Maybe he even had a plan, but there wasn’t much that could drive off Bart at the moment.

**B**art was looking right at Ava and Gus. Grey knew they were going to be in trouble. There was no good options here. Someone was bound to get hurt.

Bart stood tall on his saddle, cutting an impressive figure in the night. He had always been able to cultivate an imposing stature, something that intimidated most people out of fighting.

Grey had witnessed the man create that image. He'd always said it prevented unnecessary deaths, and Grey had believed it when he was younger.

It still rang true, but he also understood Bart. The man was fully willing to kill someone. And Grey was the target of his rage.

There was regret in his mind regardless of whatever fate had in store for him. Grey should have just let those men get away with the cattle.

It wouldn't cost any lives in the long run. This felt like an impossible situation. Nothing would end the way that he wanted to.

He had no chance of ever succeeding at anything. It felt so useless to even try to stop all of this. And it was all his fault if someone got hurt.

But Grey knew he had to do something. He had to get their attention.

He screamed. Even if it brought all of Bart's rage down on him, it didn't matter. He had to stop Ava from walking into a fight she

couldn't win.

Gus was a good man and Ava was feisty, but they couldn't stand up to half a dozen men on horseback — not with whatever they had brought with them.

“Ava, stay back. Go back to the house.”

Bart turned toward him. “You shouldn't have done that.”

“But I did.” Grey's voice was tinged with terror. “I needed to, because you need to deal with me.”

“I didn't think you wanted anything to do with me anymore,” Bart taunted him.

The rage was still there, right behind the teasing, giving the entire exchange a dangerous quality.

But Grey was tired of Bart ruling everything that he did. He was done with everything the bandit brought into his world.

He didn't lower his tone as he spoke out his frustrations.

“You weren't my family. You claimed to be, but all you did was use me for my abilities, training me to be the man you wanted me to be.”

Bart stopped in his tracks.

Grey drew in a breath. He had a lot to say, but wasn't sure how much time Bart would give him to get it all out. He would have to talk fast.

His voice tumbled out from between his lips, breathing life into a reality he had never wanted to face before this moment. “You don't care about anyone but yourself.

“You never did. You were only happy to find me young because you could teach me to live the way you wanted to, because I didn't know

any better.

“I don’t know what made you think it was a good idea, but you did. Pick up these kids young when they don’t have anyone, and instead of getting them someplace where they could survive and the help they needed, you used it to put together a team.”

“Not all of these men came to me young.” Bart sneered, clearly feeling superior.

“Of course they didn’t. If you couldn’t find them young, you found them already corrupted. You act like you’re a father to the gang, but you’re not.

“You’re just a taskmaster bent on getting the things you want and not caring who you step on. Look at you. Your moods change like the weather.

“We never know if we’re going to get hit or praised.”

“You know exactly what was expected of you. You broke your word and now you’re going to have to pay for it.”

“No. No, I’m not. I’m going to have a chance at living a good life. A chance you never gave me.” Grey’s voice was desperate and shrill.

He wasn’t going to end this until he had a chance to get it all out.

It was too important. He needed to say all the things that were rolling around in his mind, the words that were born of pain.

Bart didn’t seem eager to hear it. His face was twisted in rage, fists ready to strike out at Grey.

Grey didn’t care if Bart shot him. It would hurt and he would end up leaving Ava alone, but this was something that would keep getting in the way if he didn’t deal with it.

Ava and Gus had paused in the distance. Bart was between Grey and the woman he loved. He wanted to go to her and make sure that she was safe, but there was no way he would make it.

The only thing he could do was continue to tell Bart exactly how he had felt all those years. “But you couldn’t break me.”

“I couldn’t teach you,” Bart growled as he corrected Grey.

“It wasn’t teaching. You wanted to break me and turn me into a monster who didn’t care if my victim lived or died.”

“We didn’t kill anyone who didn’t fight back.”

“You didn’t kill anyone who didn’t defend themselves from you stealing from them, that’s what you mean.”

“What’s the difference?”

“You’ve never understood that other people exist for any purpose other than to give you what you want.”

“I don’t think this is a path you want to be on.” Bart’s voice held a warning.

Grey knew he was just making Bart angrier. He didn’t care at all.

He wanted to keep pushing this. Maybe Gus and Ava would run away before he died, or maybe it would give them a few moments after his life ended.

He stood there for a long moment. Bart didn’t say anything, either. They just sized each other up.

Grey saw Bart in such a different light these days. The way he used to look at the man seemed so foreign and strange.

That was one of the things truth did, it shone a light in all the dark

crevices he had worked so hard to ignore.

“You think you’re so special, so important, but you never ever did anything for any of these people. All you did was ruin all of our lives.”

“You all made the choice to stay with me.”

“After you told us we didn’t have another choice.” Grey was half trying to convince Bart’s other followers, but it didn’t seem to be working.

“They know better. They know what happens if you try that life.”

“That’s not true at all.” Grey shook his head.

“You don’t know anything about the truth,” Bart screamed at him. “You don’t know anything about anything. You just want to think you’re doing the right thing. There is no right thing.”

“The right thing is saving lives.”

“You know what happens to people that stand in our way,” Bart said, reminding Grey of all the things that he had assisted with when he ran with the gang.

“What do you think is going to happen to you?” His voice was threatening.

“You’ll probably kill me, but I don’t care. You’re a monster. That’s all you’re ever going to be. You’re not some magnanimous thief that collects lost souls.

“That’s just a cover for what you really are.”

Bart snorted. He raised his pistol and pointed it right at Grey.

Grey flinched. This was it. He was about to die. He only felt bad about leaving Ava alone. His mind wandered over the life they could have

had.

It would have been amazing, something beyond anything he had ever thought possible. She was absolutely perfect in every single way.

There was no way he would leave her behind if he had any other choice. He suddenly wanted to take back everything he had said only because it had angered Bart to the point of being ready to kill.

Dying without knowing her kiss. Dying without knowing her soul the way he should. That was the only regret he had.

And the thought of it played out over and over in his head while the moment stretched on, each heartbeat seeming to take an hour.

There was nothing he could do but accept fate. There was something comforting in the thought.

He had finally chosen to do the right thing and live an honest life, but his past had still found him. It hurt, but it felt like something he deserved.

Then, Bart's arm swung away from Grey. It was like the world ended when his life didn't. Grey had a dreadful knowledge of what was about to happen.

His eyes grew wide and another scream escaped his lips. This scream was one of despair as he saw Bart's aim land solely on Ava.

Bart was going to shoot her. Time stretched out. His body felt as if it was bolted to the spot as the fear coursed through him.

He couldn't live without her. He could see it as Bart took aim.

Grey started to move, but there was no way he would ever make it to where Bart was in time to deflect the aim of the bandit.

Bart was going to get that shot off. Ava was going to die.



It was the first time Grey had ever felt the desire to kill someone. And his target was Bart.

But he couldn't focus on that hate as he saw the gun go off, a bullet heading straight for Ava.

He didn't even hear himself scream, but he could feel it in his chest.

His heart wrenched out of position and every single hope and dream he'd ever had was crushed as the bullet took flight.

Time slowed down, and then all he saw was red.

Ava's eyes widened. She felt nothing at first, just numbness that surrounded her. It didn't seem right. Nothing seemed to make sense.

Her mind wasn't working through what was happening to her body.

Then, there was the searing pain as the bullet ripped through her arm. It hurt worse than anything she had ever felt.

She hissed, trying to hold onto the wound, but her body didn't feel like it was able to function properly.

Ava couldn't even be sure she was applying pressure to the wound, except for the sharp pain that accompanied the sensation of her hand on the bleeding bullet hole.

She couldn't think. Nothing seemed to make sense. She felt unsteady, slipping from the back of the horse.

She tried to stop herself, but she grabbed at the steed with the wrong arm, sending more shooting pain. The wound was bad enough that she had no strength.

She saw her life. Her childhood in the gardens. Picking flowers. Reading books. She argued with her parents a lot.

Bullets were flying around, over her head. She didn't know if Grey and Gus could win this. She wanted to help, pulling herself up and popping off a few shots with her gun.

She didn't know if she hit anything, but she could hear the shots happening around her. The fight was intense, but Grey and Gus had cover.

She had to hope that it was enough.

Her dreams played out in her head. None of them seemed to have the same substance they had before. She saw what was expected of her and it just didn't feel right.

She felt lost, like she was going to die without ever knowing what it was like to really live.

Then she saw the trip, falling off the train and being saved by Grey. She opened her eyes and he was there, looking at her with those beautiful gray eyes.

It was the moment he'd found her laying the ground, barely able to move. That was the moment that changed everything for her.

It was a world she had never thought would exist for her. He had opened all of it up.

She remembered him saying something, but she couldn't understand what he was saying through the pain. It was bleeding over into the memory.

She tried to remember, closing her eyes to pinpoint the moment in her mind.

The words started to cling to her mind. He was talking to her. She could hear his voice.

"Don't close your eyes."

That didn't make sense. It wasn't what he had said to her.

Her eyes blinked open. Grey was there. Her vision was blurry, and she

couldn't see him straight. It broke her heart to lose sight of Grey.

He needed to be there — no, she needed him there with her.

She knew that she needed him. Ava loved Grey. Even through the pain, those thoughts rung out loud and clear. It was undeniable.

Her heartbeat sped up. Her shirt felt wet. It must have been the blood. The memory was starting to fade into reality, but Grey's blurry form didn't fade any further.

She was having trouble seeing.

"Come on, you're going to be all right," Grey's voice said. He didn't sound calm.

She was still confused, trying to make sense of the words that didn't fit in her memory. "What?"

"Come on. Stay with me," Grey's voice urged her. "You can hear me. You're going to be fine."

That didn't feel right. Grey must have been there right next to her. She shivered. It didn't make sense. Grey had been so far away.

Ava couldn't figure out how he had gotten so close to her so quickly. Time was warping.

Her body was moved, but she wasn't the one moving her body. Someone must have been moving her to a different location.

Her head felt fuzzy, but Grey's voice was still there, urging her to wake up. He was begging her to be all right.

She remembered being shot and the pain and a rush. She didn't feel pain again until whoever was carrying her shifted her awkwardly.

Then it hurt so badly she screamed.

Grey shushed her. "You have to stay quiet."

The sounds of gunfire exploded around her, pulling her out of her confusion. She looked around, the pain throbbing in her arm.

She couldn't move the limb. The bullet had done a lot of damage.

It was all starting to come together. "Grey?"

"You're going to be fine. Just stay here," he begged her and then turned around. "I'll be right with you, I promise."

The firefight was happening all around her. She had no idea how Grey had gotten all the way over to her, but he must have taken the risk.

Now, Gus and Grey were hunkered down behind a fence with some wood pulled up in front of them. Things were starting to become clearer, making more sense.

She had been shot, but had no idea how bad the damage was.

Her body shuddered. It was all out of her control. "Grey?"

"Just stay down, Ava. We'll get you help. Just stay with us."

She blinked her vision back, seeing the men across the field. It was dark, but it seemed so light.

The flash of gunfire made everything seem to be a series of still photographs, only appearing as the light allowed. Ava shivered. "Grey?" she asked again, still confused.

"Just stay there. You're going to be fine."

Another flash of gunfire and she grew more panicked. Grey wasn't looking the right direction. She struggled to point with her good arm.

"Grey!" She screamed his name this time.

“I’m right here.”

She didn’t want to be assured. She wanted him to see. She forced her mind to clear and her voice to speak. “Grey, look, there.” It was all she could say.

It must have gotten his attention and he turned to where Bart was starting to pull himself up in order to shoot again.

The man looked like he had been run over by a wagon, a complete mess. The bandit must have taken at least one bullet.

Ava grew suddenly aware that Grey and Gus were outnumbered.

She wanted to help. Reaching down, she gathered the gun that had been handed to her and started to pull herself over to the men.

Grey turned around. He must have heard her move. “Ava, stay back, please.”

She shivered and grunted and grimaced from the pain, settling back down.

Ava wouldn’t be much help anyway. That knowledge didn’t stop her from wanting to try, at least a little bit.

She felt weak and useless, like she had just been in the way.

Bandits started to scatter, running from the ranch. The day was won.

She breathed in a sigh of relief, but it just made her feel a strange pain in her upper ribs, right on the side where her arm had taken a bullet.

Ava wanted to tell Grey how much pain she was in and ask him for help, but she knew it would only serve to distract him more.

The man she loved rushed out from cover, trying to round up as many of the bandits as he could. Ava didn’t know why he would do that. It

didn't make any sense.

It just put him out in the open. Anyone could take advantage of it.

Her eyesight sharpened with a new mission. She had to cover Grey, tell him if someone was going to hurt him.

The muzzle flares were dying down, it was getting harder to see anything. The only movement she saw were shadows.

She pointed, screamed, did anything she could to tell him what she saw and he didn't. The shadows weren't an illusion.

Grey turned toward them, lifting his gun and firing.

In the brightness of the firing bullet, she saw Bart had pulled himself up again, trying to shoot at Grey.

She didn't know whether the shot had connected or not, but it seemed the danger had subsided.

Grey and Gus started to tie up any bandits that hadn't been able to escape. She tried to remember the word. "Routed?" she spoke aloud even if she didn't mean to.

Grey turned to her. "Huh?"

"Were they routed?"

"What does that mean?"

"Defeated?" Her voice was weak.

Gus nodded. "Yeah, we got them."

She nodded and leaned back against whatever Grey had put her against. Her head started to grow fuzzy again now that the panic had stopped.

She was bleeding, she could feel it.

Ava gripped the wound on her arm, trying to hold tightly, but she was having trouble keeping any strength. She was fading into unconsciousness.

Her life felt like it was in danger, but she wasn't sure. It might have just been the pain that she was feeling. Nothing seemed to make any sense.

Grey rushed back over to her. "Ava, we're going to get you someplace safe."

"I'm sorry. I just got in the way."

"You weren't in the way. You were never in the way." The way Grey said it was so earnest and truthful that it made her heart melt. "And you will never be in the way."

"Thank you." It was all she could say after he spoke that way about her.

He was in so much pain just because she had gotten hurt. There must have been a lot more on his mind, but he only talked about her, easing her anxiety.

He spoke words of comfort. She was unaware of how much time had passed or what Gus was doing while Grey held her hand and whispered about the future.

She squeezed his hand.

"We're going to get you help. Don't worry." He smiled through his tears.

"I know." Her throat felt dry. "I'm not worried."

"Just hold on. Gus is going to get the cart."



She sighed, pulling herself up so that she could reposition herself.

Grey immediately moved to help. "Be careful."

"I'm careful. I just can't get comfortable."

"That's because you got shot."

"I'm sorry."

Grey looked concerned. "It's not your fault. We can blame the man that shot you."

She nodded. Ava felt weak. She tried to shift her body again, hoping to find a position that would help relieve the excruciating pain.

She knew she had to look terrible, but Grey didn't seem to notice that. He was just helping her as much as he could. "You shouldn't move so much."

"I have to move. It hurts not to." She shook her head.

"What are you saying?"

"If I rest right there, like this, it hurts more. I need to stop it from hurting."

Grey reached over and put his hands on her injured arm. He squeezed.

"You need to stay still, you're bleeding a lot. If you lose too much blood, it's going to be hard to transport you."

"Where?"

He looked at her for a moment. "To the doctor. Gus is going to take you to the doctor."

"Are you coming with me?"

He nodded. "I wouldn't think of being anywhere else. You're stuck with me whether you like it or not."

She snickered through the pain. "I like it."

"That's good to hear." He smiled again.

It was such a nice smile, even when it was tinged with sadness. She liked seeing the smile reach his eyes, but it wasn't quite making it there this time.

Gus called out. "I need some help over here."

Grey frowned and looked down at Ava. "I have to go help him."

"I'll be fine." She nodded as she made the promise, licking her lips. "Just going to get some rest. It's just fine."

Grey pulled his belt off and wrapped it around her arm. She should have thought of that, but it was hard to think clearly at that moment. "Just stay here. Don't try to move."

"I won't." She shook her head. "Just hurry."

Grey kept glancing back at Ava as he tied up the bandits. She could barely keep her head up. Her skin was pale. “How much more help do you need?” He was impatient.

Gus frowned. “Go, I can take it from here.”

Bart sneered. His hands were tied, but he still had so much confidence. “I hope she dies.”

“If she dies, I’ll kill you.” Grey put his hand on his weapon.

Once Bart had gone down, fallen from his horse, most of the bandits had scattered.

In a sense they had cut the head off the snake, making it so the rest of the men couldn’t operate without his leadership. It was a weakness of the way Bart ran things, even if the bandit would never admit it.

He didn’t seem worried. “You’ll try.”

It would have been infuriating if Grey wasn’t worried about Ava. He ignored his old boss, hearing the ripping of cloth behind him as he rushed back to Ava.

He scooped her up, trying to find the right words to make all of this better.

Her head shifted so it was resting on his chest as he walked over to

the horse she had ridden up to the fight. "This may hurt a little."

"Already hurts."

"I'll try to be gentle."

She nodded.

It took a long time to gently heft her onto the horse and climb up himself. He tried desperately not to make the injuries worse.

He held her close once he was on the horse, riding over to Gus. "Where's the doctor?"

"In town, right next to the general store. It's the one with the bright yellow flower boxes. You can't miss it."

Gus pointed in the direction of town, waving Grey off with the same gesture.

Grey considered his time in town. It wasn't hard to remember the exact house Gus was talking about. "I don't know when I'll be back."

"Take your time. I'm going to get the wagon set up."

"You aren't taking me anywhere," Bart growled.

Gus nudged the bandit with his boot. It was very nearly a kick.

Grey was grateful Gus didn't need anything else from him. It all felt so weird and wrong. He should be helping Gus, the man could get into trouble.

But Ava seemed to be on the verge of death and she needed to be taken to help. "Stay awake. Stay with me," he begged her as he rode off with her.

She mumbled against his chest, "Am I going to live?"

“You’re going to live. I promise.” He wasn’t sure he could keep that promise, but the lie was important. She had to keep fighting the pain. She had to keep going.

“Everything is going to be just fine.”

“I don’t feel fine.”

“No, but you will. I’m taking you to the doctor.”

“They have a doctor in this town?” Her speech was slurred.

He had seen men in this condition before. It wasn’t a good sign. But Bart had never let them go to the doctor, so most of them died from the wounds.

“They do. You don’t have to worry about anything. Just try to stay awake for me.”

“It hurts so much.”

“I know it does, but keep fighting for me.” He pulled her closer. He had to keep pushing back the tears. Ava was hurt so badly, it was almost more than he could bear.

It was tough to keep himself focused on getting her help when everything in him was telling him to stop and try to treat her himself.

But he wasn’t a trained doctor. And while the ride may hurt her, it would be better to get her to where someone could actually help her survive the gunshot wound.

Infections were a real risk. So many people died from them.

“It moves too much.”

He winced. The ride had to hurt her. It took everything in him to slow down so it didn’t cause her as much pain as a full gallop did. “Is that

better?”

“No. Hurts.”

“I’ve got to get you to the doctor.”

“Stop the horse.”

“I can’t stop the horse. I need to get you to town.” He was repeating himself.

Ava didn’t seem to be thinking straight. He wanted her to get better, but magic didn’t exist to fix it. He just had to keep going and hope she would make it.

His heart was breaking in his chest as the horse’s hooves echoed on the packed dirt and rock of the road. His whole life was bleeding out in his hands.

She was his world and he couldn’t let it go.

She shifted herself in his arms.

Grey loosened his grip just enough to let her try to get comfortable without falling off the horse. “Hey, be careful.”

“I am careful.” The words were barely understandable.

Grey tried to help her shift into a more upright position with her head leaning against his shoulder. His arms tightened protectively around her waist.

She leaned up, putting her lips next to his ear. “I trust you. Everything is going to be fine.”

Those words made his heart soar. He had already known how she felt in his heart, but there was something about the way she said it that made him realize that no matter what happened, she would be there

for him.

It gave him hope in what felt like a hopeless situation. Her eyes started to close, making him ride faster. She wasn't complaining anymore.

Ava seemed to be far too tired to complain and that wasn't a good sign. He shivered and pulled her in close to him.

Everything was wrong.

He rushed on down the road, picking up speed once again. His heart was racing. If Ava was losing consciousness, that couldn't happen.

He kept talking to her as he rode. He told her about his dreams. He told her about the ranch and the guest house and the wedding.

He talked about children and a little perfume store. He poured out his heart, knowing she probably wouldn't remember it.

Tears streamed down his face. He didn't know how this was all going to turn out, but he couldn't stop telling her about everything that he wanted with her.

He rode into town and people were staring out the windows.

He was covered in blood and looked like his entire world had ended. It must have been quite the sight to those watching him.

He shivered, but didn't stop because of any of the people from staring. He had one place to be and that was with the doctor. He hoped the doctor was in.

Someone rushed out in front of the horse. "What happened?"

"Gus's ranch was attacked by bandits. They shot her. I need the doctor." Grey stumbled over the words. "Please. Just get out of the way."

Grey didn't like waiting. Especially not when it was this important. Ava was in danger. He frowned, unable to focus on anything else. Distractions didn't seem to work.

The doctor had been fetched from the saloon. Grey didn't smell any alcohol on the man's breath, and there weren't a lot of options even if the man had been drinking.

They were going to have to save her right then.

It still hurt to pass her over. He wanted to be in the room while she was on the table, but the doctor had told him to stay in the front.

All he could do was pace until the doctor stepped out to take a breath.

As soon as the bespectacled physician was in sight, Grey rushed over. "How is she?"

"I'm not done yet," the man said and turned back into the room.

Grey was left alone once again, pondering exactly what his future would hold.

He felt like he was on the edge of a precipice. The building he was in could have probably exploded and he wouldn't have noticed.

He certainly didn't notice when the steaming cup of tea was placed into his hands. At least, not until the warmth cut through his



distraction.

He looked up, and a kind woman smiled at him. "I'm sure it's going to be fine."

"I hope so." Grey tried to smile back. "But thank you."

"The doctor is good at his job."

Grey nodded. "I just want to know how she's doing."

"He probably can't give you any information yet. He has to know what's going on with her before he can tell you what it is."

"She was shot."

"There's more to it than that."

Grey threw up his hands in frustration. He wanted to hit something, but he couldn't let himself do it. This woman had done nothing to deserve his ire. He was just frustrated.

Ava wouldn't approve if he didn't make an effort to control himself around people that were helping them.

The core of it was the gnawing worry that he couldn't get past. It taunted him every time he tried to focus on anything else. Another flash of anger hit him.

He was angry at the world for letting this happen so soon after he found true happiness. The thought of punishment for his crimes crossed his mind.

He had made many mistakes — perhaps Ava would be destined to always pay for his past.

Bart would end up in prison, but others in the gang were still loose. With the leader gone, it was likely that they wouldn't reform and do

much of anything, but there was always the chance that a new leader could emerge and cause problems in Grey's life.

He prayed this wouldn't happen all over again. The prayer made the anger start to fade and he felt contrite for snapping at this poor woman in front of him. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry, your wife was shot. It makes a man act irrationally."

"I think I just need to be alone for a while."

She sighed. "I'll leave you to it, then."

Grey turned away. He didn't have much energy for niceties. He didn't want to talk to this woman, probably the doctor's wife.

It was rude to act that way, and Ava wouldn't be happy that he had treated the woman like that. Grey turned around and raised a hand in a weak sort of wave. "I'm sorry."

The woman offered him a warm smile. "It's all right. I understand."

"I'm just worried about her. If something happens to her, I'll never forgive myself." He sat down on the couch.

Her smile was well practiced. "I know it's hard, but you just have to wait. I'm sure everything will be just fine and the doctor will do all he can."

"I know, I can't ask him to do more than that, but it was so bad. It looked so bad." He shook his head. "I just don't know what to do."

A voice called out from the other room, and the woman shuffled off. "I need to go help. I have to leave you, I'm sorry."

"I'll be fine." Grey nodded. "Just make sure she's okay."

“I’ll do my best.”

The promises sounded nice, but Grey was still panicking. He couldn’t stop the image of Ava being shot from playing through his head.

His gaze wandered around the room, eventually settling on a bookshelf. Maybe a book would help him calm down. At the very least he would have some sort of company.

The woman was gone and he walked over. There were a few novels and children’s books there.

His first choice was something simple. He wasn’t a strong reader yet, even if he tried. Ava’s lessons had been amazing.

His hand lingered for a long moment on the spine of the book before he pulled it out and opened the cover.

His mind was immediately flooded with memories of curling up by the firelight every night, a blanket pulled over their bodies for comfort.

She had been so close, leaning onto him as she helped him sound out every word. He had been learning, studying and becoming something more than he once was.

There had been more lessons than just the first one. Every night, they had read. It had brought them closer. He knew he still had a long way to go.

Learning new things was difficult, but Ava had made it enjoyable.

Tears started to leak from his eyes again as he remembered all those days. He worried about losing her, wondering what it would mean if she died.

Would he be able to explain it to her parents? He wasn’t even sure how to contact them. She had sent the letter without him.

That would make doing the right thing more difficult, but he would find a way if the worst came to pass. They deserved to know what happened to their only daughter.

She had spoken about her family a lot. They were the only world she had ever known before the journey that had brought her into his company.

She had been sheltered, but Ava had taken to this life. She had embraced it happily, learning everything she could and trying hard to stand up to every challenge.

It made her special, probably more special than she would ever realize. He sighed.

It took a big person to adapt to the kind of changes she had been forced into. This entire situation was partially his fault.

He thought about if he had told her to hide that perfume bottle and considered what would have happened if that had been the case.

He would never have known her like he'd gotten the chance to. She would have continued on to marry that man in California.

It seemed so strange to think about how one small thing would have changed everything.

But if he had done that, if that one small thing had changed, her life wouldn't be in danger at that moment. If she had died, she would have died for nothing.

Nothing was resolved, nothing was perfect for her. She hadn't lived her dreams. She'd had a tough month out here in the West, nothing she had ever experienced.

He had watched her smile and laugh and dance in the moonlight of the West. He had seen her happy and dirty and testing a new world.

Over time she had become more and more free, opening up to the world.

As he looked at the words on the page, all of this came flooding back, from the first moment he had seen her face on that train he was robbing.

It all felt so strange. He didn't know how to handle this rush of emotions.

He would normally talk to Ava about it, but he couldn't find the words without her around. He didn't know if there would ever be a way to handle this situation.

Grey looked at the book, slowly leafing through the pages as more and more memories flooded into his mind.

An unstoppable cascade of tears accompanied all those feelings. He couldn't stop them if he tried. Everything was just falling apart for him.

He had to keep going. Losing his mind over this would leave Ava without anyone that knew her in the house. He had to keep his mind on her recovery.

His own pain could wait. And that meant he had to wait.

But it was just too much.

Fighting back the sobs, he managed to put the book back on its shelf. There was no way he was going to be able to read until he knew what was going on with Ava.

The truth was that he loved her more than he had ever thought possible. Rebecca hadn't compared to her at all.

The woman before had been nothing but a passing fancy compared the emotions Ava dug out of him. He had been able to let go of

Rebecca.

It had hurt, but he knew he would never be able to fully let go of Ava. She would be his world even if she died.

He had changed his life for Ava, something he had never done for anyone else. With her, he'd finally gotten the courage to live the kind of life he should have years before.

He felt like he was waiting for hours. After a while, Gus came into the doctor's office.

"How's she doing?"

Grey sighed. "I don't really know."

Gus grimaced. "No news yet, then?"

"No, no news."

"Do you need anything? Food? Drink?"

"I don't think I could eat or drink if my life depended on it right now."

Grey couldn't directly look at Gus. The man looked like he hadn't taken the time to clean up after the fire fight. "Where are the kids?"

"I dropped them with a neighbor before I brought those men to town."

"That's good. They don't need to be a part of this."

"Nobody should be a part of this." Gus frowned, leaning forward.

"You don't have to be here."

"I think you need somebody right now. I know what you're feeling. If it goes bad, you're going to need someone here."

“Why would you even keep me around after all of that? After that gang attacked your ranch? Those were my men, the bandits that I grew up with.

“They were the men I worked with for many years,” Grey admitted.

“It’s not your fault he shot her.”

“He shot her because he knew it would hurt me.”

“That’s because you’re human. You hurt when the people you love get hurt.” Gus rested a hand on his shoulder.

Grey didn’t say anything. He couldn’t make any words come out. His throat was tight and sore as he unsuccessfully tried to hold back his tears.

He put his head in his hands, trying to hide his distress. Gus didn’t say anything, but it was obvious that the man wasn’t fooled.

A large part of Grey wanted Gus to leave and let him mourn in peace. In Grey’s mind, the worst had already happened and he was just waiting on confirmation.

“The doctor won’t say anything.” He croaked out the words. “Is it because she’s not going to make it?”

Grey didn’t know why he was asking, he already felt like he knew the truth. He just couldn’t sit in silence any longer.

“That’s not always what it means. The doctor can be a bit of a surly sort and when he’s working, he’s not so good at talking to people.”

“I just want to know if she’s going to be all right.”

Gus’s frown deepened. “The truth is, we don’t know what’s going to happen. Either it’s going to be all right or it won’t, but we decide how we choose to respond to the situation.”

Grey closed his eyes, just listening to the other man's voice. It didn't help much, but it did bring him the slightest peace.

There was nothing he could do to change anything at that moment. He would just have to wait and pray that it all turned out all right.

She would either make or not. Grey just hoped he would find the strength to handle whatever the answer was.

For the first time in a very long time, he turned his face to the heavens and prayed.



**G**rey's attention was grabbed by the door opening. The doctor stepped out and motioned to him.

In a second, he had made his way out of his seat and over to where the doctor stood.

The doctor nodded.

Grey didn't know what it meant. "What is it? Is everything all right?"

"You should come in here."

Grey followed the man in without another word. It seemed the doctor wasn't about to answer any questions for him.

He had a heavy heart as he saw Ava lying there on the table. She seemed so frail and broken. She wasn't moving. His heart started to race. "Is she alive?"

"Yes. She's starting to wake up." The doctor spoke softly.

Grey rushed over to her side and took her hand in his. "Ava?" His voice was gentle. "Ava, can you hear me?"

A ragged breath drew across her lips, heavier than the soft breaths he could barely register before. "Yes." The single word was hoarse from trauma and pain.

"I'm so glad you're alive." Grey had the urge to dance.

He looked up. Gus was standing in the doorway, quietly discussing things with the doctor.

He didn't care what they were saying, probably figuring out some way Grey could pay for the treatment Ava had received.

But he would pay any price to keep her by his side. He would work as hard as he had to in order to keep her bills paid, no matter what it took.

She was his wife, even if nothing was official. They hadn't seen a priest. They hadn't taken the steps young couples in love do, but he had fallen so hard for her.

They had shared so much time together.

She turned slightly, trying to look at him. "Grey?" She licked her chapped lips.

"What is it?"

"Water."

Grey stood up. "I'll get you some."

He walked out to where Gus was speaking to the doctor, just outside the open door.

The doctor looked up. "Has she woken up more?"

"She's asking for some water, can she have some?"

The doctor nodded. "It'll probably be good for her. I'll get some and bring it in. You go sit with her."

Grey turned back to the bed. Ava's eyes were clearer now. She was

starting to come to herself. He was grateful.

“The doctor’s going to get you some water. Just rest. Everything is going to be just fine.” He brushed her hair back from her face.

She gave him a weak smile and squeezed his hand. “How bad is it?”

“I don’t know. I guess the doctor will tell us soon enough.”

Grey glanced over at the wound. Her dress had been cut away and the wounds were stitched up neatly and cleaned.

Everything looked good, at least from his perspective. He wasn’t a professional, though, so it was hard to tell.

She softly tugged on his hand, trying to pull him close. “What is it?”

“Nothing, he just did a good job on your arm.”

“Does it look bad?”

“You’ll probably have a scar. I don’t think there was any way you wouldn’t.”

“It’s really sore. I think the bone is broken.”

He looked at the wound again. “The bullet may have hit some bone, but I’m sure you’ll heal just fine.”

“Will I be able to use it again?”

He frowned. “I don’t know. We haven’t talked about that yet. The doctor has been pretty busy taking care of you and I wasn’t able to ask many questions.”

It was a nice way to put it. The doctor had been terse and hadn’t said much to Grey at all. He didn’t want to bother her with that, though.

He just wanted Ava to focus on getting better.

“Are we going to find out?”

He sighed. Ava was going to keep asking. “When he comes in with the water, we can ask him then.”

“All right.” She nodded and closed her eyes.

He let her rest. The doctor came in and she must have heard him because she started moving again.

The man handed Grey the water. “She may need some help drinking.”

“I’ll help her.”

Ava croaked, “Ask him.”

Grey nodded. “She was wondering if she will be able to use her arm again?”

“Her arm will probably be fine. She’s going to need to take it easy and get lots of rest. I was able to pull the bullet out, but it had gone through the arm and into her ribs.

“That’s going to make it hard for her to get around until that rib heals. But she should be just fine.”

Ava nodded, and Grey helped her drink some water. It took some work because Ava couldn’t sit up on her own.

Gus walked into the room. “How’s she doing?”

“She’s going to be fine, just in rough shape at the moment.”

The doctor nodded. “I’ll probably keep her here for a couple days, just to be safe. She can go home when she’s well enough to travel.”

Grey pursed his lips. He wanted to stay with her, but knew it wasn't possible. The doctor would likely send him home.

Ava pushed the water away with her good arm. "Can Grey stay with me?"

He nodded urgently. "I'd like to stay, if I could."

The doctor raised an eyebrow. "Not in the room with her, but you can sleep on the couch after we get her set up in a bed."

"Thank you." Ava gave her weak smile again.

The doctor smiled back and then turned to walk out. Gus followed him.

Grey turned back to Ava. "I'll stay with you until we can get you home."

"It is home." She nodded. "It's home now."

Grey thought about it for a second. She had picked up on what he'd said before he realized exactly what words had exited his mouth. Home.

That word had so much meaning. It was a place where he finally belonged, with people who cared about him in ways he would never be able to understand.

He still had to work through the bad habits he'd formed when he was a bandit, but the work he'd done so far had made him a brand-new man with hopes and aspirations.

It was a miracle. And Ava had been the angel that brought it into his life.

"I can't wait to get you home." He smiled at her.

“I want to go home with you. And stay with you.”

“Stay? I think you should wait until you’re thinking straight to make that decision. You almost died. That tends to make people a little crazy.”

She shook her head. The motion was almost imperceptible.

“I want to stay with you. I made the decision before we left the clearing, I just didn’t have a chance to tell you because of what happened.”

He chuckled softly. “Well, I didn’t realize that.”

“We were both distracted.”

“That we were.” He squeezed her hand.

He wanted to pull her to her feet and embrace her, but he knew that she couldn’t do that yet. He had to bide his time until she was better.

“How long until I go home again? What did he say? I don’t remember.”

“He said you’ll be here for a few days. But with how strong you are, I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re on your feet in half that time.”

He was a little worried, but the woman had been drugged and was just waking up. It was normal that she wouldn’t remember such things.

She laughed, then groaned. “Don’t make me laugh. It hurts when I laugh.”

“Sorry.”

Grey started to fuss over her blankets, adjusting the sheets and fluffing her pillow until she weakly slapped at him with her uninjured arm.

“Stop that.”

“I’m trying to find something to do. It’s easier than thinking about tonight.” His hand draped over her shoulders, helping her lay back down.

The doctor came back into the room before the conversation could go any further.

“My wife got a room set up for her to sleep in tonight. Do you think you can help me get her moved?”

Gus stepped up, holding a stretcher, and the three of them worked together to carefully shift Ava’s prone form. She tried to help, but just ended up falling back because of the pain it caused to move.

Grey kept trying to soothe her and keep her calm, but she wasn’t happy with the process. She was in pain and every attempt to move her just brought her more agony.

Ava had lost her lucid moment; instead, she was frantically trying to push them away and yelling for help. She was talking about having been kidnapped and needing to get back to Grey.

It broke his heart, but he knew she couldn’t stay on the doctor’s table forever. She had to move.

Eventually, the three men managed to relocate the young woman.

Gus chuckled. “You would think that would have been easier.”

“It never is.” The doctor shook his head.

Grey didn’t feel like laughing.

Gus frowned. “I think we should leave you to try to cheer her up.” He ushered the doctor back out of the ground floor guest room that they had Ava staying in.

Grey noticed a chair by the bed. He pulled it closer so he could sit next to Ava.

Then, another idea crossed his mind. He darted out to the sitting room and picked up one of the books.

He sat down next to her bed and started to read slowly. He still needed practice, but his voice seemed to soothe her.

He let her rest as long as she wanted, eventually dozing off in the chair next to her bed.

The sun was streaming through the window when the soft touch woke him from his slumber. He nearly jumped out of his skin.

A soft laugh, still weak, came from Ava. "Scared you."

"You've been scaring me non-stop for a while now." Grey shook his head as his heartbeat started to return to normal. "But I don't mind."

"You don't mind me scaring you?"

"I don't mind as long as you stick around to keep scaring me." He shook his head.

"I don't ever want to scare you, at least not like I did last night."

"It's okay. That wasn't your fault." Grey stood up to open the curtains and let in more sunlight. "You shouldn't be worried about me, anyway."

"Are you saying I can't worry about you?" She reached toward him.

He quickly moved back over to his chair and held her hand. "I'm saying right now, all you need to worry about is getting better."

"How are we going to pay the doctor?"



"We'll find a way." Grey sighed. "It's okay. You don't need to worry about that at all. All you need to do is get better."

"Are you going to do this every time I worry about you for the rest of my life?"

He chuckled softly. "Not every time."

"Good, because I promise to worry about you a lot."

"You do?"

"Yes, that's what you do when you're spending your life with someone. You worry about them." She tugged him closer.

She didn't have the strength to make him do anything that he didn't want to, but he wanted to be closer to her. So, he let himself be pulled in.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I just want a quick hug."

He embraced her carefully, trying hard not to jostle the side of her body that had taken the bullet. "Tell me if I hurt you."

"You aren't hurting me."

He sat back down and took her hand. "You tell me if you need anything, all right?"

"I don't need anything, but I want you to stay here with me."

"I don't plan on leaving." He smiled at her, rubbing the back of her good hand. "I'll be right here by your side until he kicks me out to sleep in the front room."

"Good." She shifted, winced, then shifted again.

“What’s wrong?”

“Trying to find a more comfortable position.”

He leaned back, careful not to interfere as she pulled herself further into a seated position. “How long was I asleep?”

“I think it’s morning, but I haven’t checked.”

She was cradling her arm against her chest as she leaned against the headboard. “I’m going to send back my father’s money.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and tell him that I’m staying here.”

“Are you sure you should be making decisions like that right now? This can wait until later. I don’t want to get you worked up or anything.”

“I don’t want to wait. I want to stay here with you. Maybe I’m not good on the ranch yet, but I can be. And you make me happy.

“I can’t go and be in an unhappy marriage for the rest of my life after everything we’ve been through.”

He nodded. “I just don’t want you jumping in while you’re in pain.”

“You’re so sweet.” Her smile was stronger now, nearly a full grin.

But the expression only lasted until she moved again. As soon as her arm relaxed and started to drop away from her chest, she groaned in pain.

Grey jumped up from his seat. “Maybe there’s something he can give you for the pain.”

She nodded. “Can you please go ask?”

“I’ll be right back.” He walked out of the room and to the front room.

The doctor wasn’t awake yet, but his wife was ready to serve out some medication on her husband’s orders.

It didn’t take long for the morphine to start making Ava feel better.

He held her hand until she drifted back off to sleep, and he knew that his future was right there. Ava was going to live, and she was going to stay with him.

It felt unreal when he put all the pieces of the past months together in his head.

His life had changed for the better, but the changes had come so fast that it was hard to believe what all was happening.

He wouldn’t hold Ava to a promise she made while in pain, but he had a feeling she would keep it anyway.

## Epilogue – Grey

Grey rode across the field. Gus was maneuvering around the cow the two men were herding back to pasture. “Any idea where that broken fence is?”

“Not yet, I’m hoping we get her on the right track and send her in back in the way she came out.” Gus’s lips were taut in a thin line.

Grey was concentrating hard. Herding cattle was one of the most difficult parts of life on the ranch, something that he had taken a lot of extra time to pick up.

Gus had been patient with him for the year Grey and Ava had been living at the ranch.

Eventually, Grey had figured out how to work with dogs or Gus to get the cattle to go where he wanted them to go. And he had to use that

skill quite often.

The fences always seemed to need repair, and if they ever missed a spot a cow would go right through and wander off.

“Maybe she’ll lead us to the right place and we can be back for lunch?” Grey asked hopefully.

“We’re never that lucky.”

“I’d like to think I’m luckier.” Grey puffed out his chest and laughed at his own joke.

Gus chuckled as well. “Well, the proof is your pretty wife, isn’t it? Now see if you can work that charm on this cow and get her to show us where the problem is.”

Grey started to nudge his horse toward the cow, leading it more by its nature to move away from the other animal than by any sort of force or violence.

It was better that way. If the cows weren’t afraid, they were easier to get moving.

The cow didn’t lead them to the hole in the fence, but they did manage to get it to a gate quickly enough.

Grey frowned. “I’ll run around the fence and see if I can find the hole.”

“I’ll start from the other direction.” Gus nodded.

“Meet you on the other side.”

The two men parted ways, each riding a different direction along the fenceline.

The ranch always needed some kind of work and Grey was happy to

do it. They had been there a year now and that year had been wonderful.

Ava had accomplished so much, studying books that she ordered from the city and working with Gus's children. She had turned out to be fantastic with them.

It gave him hope for their future family, knowing she would be every bit a devoted and doting mother when the time came.

He was so distracted by his thoughts that he almost rode right past the hole in the fence.

A double-take and he turned back around to start working on it. It didn't take much work, the post had simply fallen down. None of the wood was broken or damaged.

It took a few minutes and by the time he had finished, Gus was coming around from the other side. "You found it." Gus rode up to him.

"I did."

"I found your wife."

Grey laughed. "What did she say?"

"She said she planned a picnic for lunch and she expects us to be there."

"Did you tell her about the fence?" Grey dug around the fallen pole so he could place it back into the right position.

"She didn't seem to care much about the fence. She just wanted you home for lunch."

"We'll get home for lunch."

"Oh, I don't think it's important that I get there. Ava seemed pretty focused on seeing you, just like most days."

"Well, I'm eager to see her, too."

"Then we'd better get this fence done so you can get back to her."

Grey tugged on the post, wedging it back into the hole. "I could get back to her faster if you would stop teasing me about my wife and help me."

Gus got off the back of his horse and started to pack the dirt around the post with his boot. "We're going to need some tools."

"I didn't bring the box."

"I didn't, either."

Grey grunted. "I need to nail in these posts again and stamp down the dirt."

"I'll head to the barn."

Soon, Grey was alone, guarding a part of the fence again, but he was happy to be there. His life had gone so well since he had left the gang.

Bart would be in jail for a very long time, probably the rest of his life, and he had been transported out of the area. Ava was safe from that danger.

She took up so much of his time. He was grateful for every moment he spent on her, though. The woman deserved all of it, everything he had to give.

She was his world and he would love her for the rest of his days.

His thoughts swirled around the memories of the past year, playing out as if they were on a stage. It had been so strange at first, and now

he wasn't sure he could ever really live without it.

His mind saw her dancing in a field of flowers, arms out as she twirled around, laughing happily.

He saw her on the edge of a riverbank, under the moonlight, looking like something out of a painting.

He saw her over and over, a thousand flashes of images that always made him smile. He couldn't help it.

She always filled his mind when there was a spare moment to think.

He had been convinced the infatuation would fade, but after a year it appeared that nothing much had changed. He still adored her with every fiber of his being.

Gus came back a few minutes later and the fence was quickly repaired. Then, the pair were on their way to go and meet with Ava and the children for a picnic.

He rode up and she smiled at him. "Ready for lunch?"

"I'm always ready for lunch. I've been ready for lunch since just after breakfast."

She laughed. "Help me carry the basket."

"A perfect way to put these muscles to use." He climbed out of the saddle and tied up the horse to the post before picking up the basket she pointed at.

"What did you put in this thing?"

"Food, gold, the works."

"Well, gold is heavy, that's got to explain it." He grinned at his wife and followed her out to where the blanket was set up for them to eat

on.

Gus spent time with his children, but Grey only had eyes for Ava. She had healed so nicely, and while her arm would never be quite the same, the limb was almost as strong as it had ever been.

He helped unload the food and played with the children for a bit as everything was dished out for them to share.

She grinned as they ate. Her cooking had improved significantly — it wasn't great, but it was average by this point and on the road to continue improving.

He watched her when he thought she wasn't looking, and when she caught him staring, he couldn't help but to blush.

She was stunning, just like she always was, a woman that took his breath away.

Eventually, the meal was finished, and Grey and Ava found themselves alone as Gus and the children brought the basket back to the house.

Ava turned to Gus. "Do you think we could take a walk?"

"Of course." He held out an arm.

She placed her hand on the crook of his elbow.

They both turned toward the small copse of trees that had become their safe haven over the past year. Things had been going well for them and this safe haven had been part of the healing process.

"Is it going to be done soon?" she asked him.

"We had to take a break this morning to deal with a broken fence, but I'll go back to it after lunch is over."



She smirked. "Lunch is already over."

"Not when my beautiful wife wants to talk to me." Grey grinned.

She toyed with the simple band on her finger.

It had been all he could afford after some time working on the ranch. Gus had been paying him fairly well, but they still had a life to put together from nothing.

He glanced at the ring, his attention grabbed by what she was doing with her finger. "You know I'm going to replace that soon, right?"

"We don't need to replace it. I'm just happy to be married to you now." Her grin widened.

"I'm sorry it wasn't the kind of wedding that you always pictured."

"Would you stop apologizing for nothing? It was exactly the wedding I wanted." She shook her head, laughing softly.

"I wanted to marry you under a tree in the yard wearing a simple dress and flowers in my hair. That was what I wanted.

"If I had wanted something bigger, I would have waited until we could afford it."

He nodded. "I just wish I could give you the world."

She leaned up to kiss his cheeks. "You are my world."

The pride of hearing those words made his chest puff out. It felt so nice that she wanted him that way. "Thank you. What did you want to talk about?"

"Oh, I was going to start working on a quilt. I was wondering what colors you might like."

“I’m not a picky guy.”

“I know you’re not, but I still want to know. It’s going to go on our bed.”

“Blue?”

“Blue would be nice. Next time I go into town I’ll order some fabric for it.”

He nodded. “Anything else?”

“No, not other than trying to get you alone for a few minutes before you went back to work.” She nudged him in the side with her elbow.

“You can have all the time you want. I have very little interest in going anywhere.” He pulled her into an embrace.

They shared a kiss that sent vibrations through his spine that could shatter glass. He kissed her so deeply that the world disappeared around them.

It wasn’t until he came back to his senses that he heard Gus’s voice in the distance calling for him.

“It sounds like I’m supposed to be back at work now.”

Ava jokingly pouted at him. “Do I have to let you go already?”

“Sadly, you do.” He took her hand. “But not for long, never for long. You’re going to be stuck with me for the rest of your life.”

“Well, I did make that promise to you in front of a preacher. Why would I take it back now?” She laughed.

“I have no idea. I know I don’t want to take it back anytime soon.”

“Good. Then you should go. I’m sure Gus has a lot for you to do.” She

pushed him away. "Get out of here while I can still let you go."

He felt dizzy from how happy he was as he walked away from the woman he loved.

Ava was amazing in every way and every day of their lives together had been a treat sent from heaven.

They had married two months after the showdown with Bart, once Ava had recovered enough to be able to handle the stress, and Gus had walked her down the aisle.

She no longer worried about the fact that her parents didn't want anything to do with her. She was fine being a pariah from the life that she'd lived before this.

Gus had the horses ready when he walked back to the house and they rode just over the hill. It wasn't a long ride, just enough to put the building site out of view from the main house in order to give some privacy to the occupants.

Grey and Gus worked hard all afternoon and no loose cows interrupted them. The building was coming along nicely. "How much longer is it going to take, do you think?"

"Three or four days, depending on what's going on here."

Grey frowned. "What's that mean?"

"If there's an emergency, it's going to take longer," Gus explained. "What did Ava want? Did she have another request for it?" He wiped his hands on his pants.

"No, she wants to make us a quilt."

"I don't think she's going to be done with a quilt in time to move it into the house." Gus frowned. "We could take longer if you think she needs the time."

“I think we should finish the house. If the quilt is late, we have other blankets.” Grey shrugged.

“I don’t see any problem with waiting on that. I don’t think she would mind either.”

“I guess you two just want out of the guest house.” Gus smiled.

“We do — not that we don’t like it, but it just didn’t feel permanent, you know?”

“I understand.”

“All right. Let’s get to work.” Grey picked up some more of the mortar to slather between the logs.

It was a small cabin, two bedrooms, but it could be expanded in the future if they needed to add to it. That was if they were still on the ranch by that time.

He considered for a moment. “Is that shop in town still up for sale?”

“The empty one?”

“That’s the one.”

“I think it is, why?”

“Ava might be interested in it. I should go talk to them and see if I can rent or buy it.”

“You’d have to talk to the bank, and it would depend on what you want to put into it. The town is always getting bigger.” Gus nodded.

“Maybe we could even put something right on the edge of the property. It’s close to town.”

“Do you think so? That would save her some money in rent. Not that

we wouldn't pay you any rent." Grey winced. He knew he'd said the wrong thing.

It sounded like he was taking advantage of Gus, but it wasn't like that. Gus had become a brother to him and it was easy to say things like that when someone was family.

Gus didn't even concern himself with it. "She won't have to pay rent. Maybe help with the property and eventually buy that bit off of me, but nothing much."

"That sounds like a grand idea."

"You should be the one to tell her about it."

"Are you sure? You're the one giving her the gift. You should probably let her know about it."

"I'm sure." Gus picked up some boards to take inside the building. "But finish up out there and then you can come help me with this floor."

"We have to do the fireplace tomorrow."

"That won't take long. Luckily, we did most of that work before we built the house around it."

Grey nodded. "I know. Let's get what we can get done while the light is good. I'd like to have Ava in the house by our first anniversary."

Gus laughed. "At least you made an honest woman out of her."

"She's been an honest woman since long before I met her. You can't stop her from speaking her mind." Grey smirked.

"That's the truth. Let's hope she likes the house or you'll never hear the end of it."

The pair shared another laugh and got down to constructing a new home for Grey and Ava. This would be a proper home for a young married couple just starting out in the world.

Both Ava and Gus had changed his life, made it something better.

Every day was something new and it was hard work to keep everything going, but that only served to remind him of just how lucky he was.

## Epilogue – Ava

Ava hummed in the bright sunlight. She swung the basket of flowers by her side, flowers picked from her very own garden near the house.

It wasn't much, but she was starting to grow the things she needed instead of ordering them from back East.

Her life was easily the best it had ever been and the shop was doing well. It wasn't going to make her rich, but the town was getting bigger and bigger every day.

More business was coming out West and it was just the right time to start a little perfume store on the outskirts of town, right where Gus's property met the town line.

The spot wasn't ideal, but it was hers, and Grey had helped put this all together. He had even done most of the building and painting, making sure she had a beautiful shop with bright flowers painted on the storefront.

Prairie Perfumes, that was the name she had picked for her very own store. Every time she saw the name on the sign, she remembered Grey painting it himself, taking such care to spell it properly and make the words neat and professional.

It made her giddy to remember how much work he'd put into showing her his writing skills.

The shop had been open for three years now, and life had been constantly changing since then. She wouldn't trade it for the world.

This was her place and this town was filled with her people, the people she should have known for her entire life.

The world was completely open to her. It still felt like a dream, even after owning it for years. This was hers.

She had managed to purchase the bit of land last year, and Gus still employed Grey, giving them a place to live and a house on his land.

Grey didn't get paid much because room and board were taken care of for the young family. But it worked for them.

She made money for any extras they needed, paid for niceties, while Grey's job took care of keeping them fed and clothed.

They shared the funds, keeping everything running, and Grey had spent a lot of time teaching her how to run a house.

He wasn't an expert, but he knew more about it than she did.

She often had children under foot when she worked these days, rarely getting a day off to herself and she loved every single second of it.

She unlocked the door and let herself into the building, setting the basket of flowers on the counter as she turned the sign to show that the building was open.

Then she got to work while she waited for the first customers of the day.

Along with perfumes, she also sold bouquets and potpourri to local wives who wanted something pretty for the house or young men hoping to woo young women.

Perfume made more money each month, but it wasn't enough to

justify keeping the place in business.

She started to arrange some flowers, picking out the less aesthetically pleasing blooms and placing them to the side.

She would press them into dried flowers to sell later in small bundles.

Ava had been working for almost an hour when her first customer arrived. It was a quick purchase of a small bundle of flowers that a young man wanted for a woman he was hoping to impress.

It made her smile to see young couples falling in love. The springtime was always good at bringing young people together.

She had been with Grey for nearly five years at this point, so she knew she was still in the early stages of the life they shared.

She hummed as she worked on products to sell, serving a few more customers.

She was just about to sit down and eat a few biscuits and some cheese when the door opened one more time. Ava glanced up as the bell rang.

Her smile started immediately. "Grey!" She nearly giggled from excitement.

Grey ducked in, a young child, almost two years old, on his shoulders. The baby chortled.

Ava grinned. "Look at you, getting so big."

The toddler reached her arms out. "Mama." The little girl had Ava's hair and Grey's eyes. She seemed to grow more intelligent and more beautiful every day.

She was a smart child that had been blessed to learn things quickly and master all the skills a child her age would know.



Ava was already helping her daughter learn to read. With Grey helping teach the lessons and reading every chance he got, it was possible she would learn to read before she even got into school.

The world would be open to that child. It was a promise Ava had made to herself when she found out that she was expecting.

She would never be pressured to marry or settle down.

The girl would have a chance at a career, money was being put aside so that she could get an education if she decided it was something that she wanted.

There was so much hope for the future there. Ava would never let it go. The child was more important than anything.

Ella would have a good life, one Ava had hoped for herself.

Grey let the baby down. "I'm looking for some flowers."

"Flowers? For what?"

"For a woman."

Ava raised an eyebrow as she scooped up the child that toddled around the counter. "What kind of flowers does she like?"

"You know, I think my wife likes all flowers."

"All flowers? Or are you using that as an excuse because you don't know the answer?"

Grey laughed and put his hands up. "You've got me. I don't know. Tell me, what kind of flowers do you like?"

"Me? Personally, I'm a fan of lilies."

"Great, I'll take some of those."

“I don’t have any in stock.”

Grey feigned a deep frown and rubbed his thumb and forefinger down his chin, playing at being deep in thought.

“Then I guess I don’t really know what kind of flowers to buy her. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe we could work something out, right after I deal with another customer.”

The child on her hip started to tug on Ava’s sleeve.

Ava looked down and cuddled her baby. “You brought her to visit me?”

“I have to go ride the fences, remember? I’m going to be gone until late in the evening.”

“Right, I’ll miss you for dinner.”

“Oh, trust me, I’ll be missing you more. At least you have little Ella to keep you company.”

Ava laughed. “I suppose I do, but she’s going to miss you, too.”

“She always does.”

“And gives me a world of trouble when her Daddy is gone for too long.” Ava took the toddler’s hand and held it.

The baby shouted some barely understandable words that indicated to her parents that she was hungry.

Ava walked over and grabbed a biscuit, sitting her daughter on a chair behind the counter.

They had done this hundreds of times by this point, shifting off the

care of the child so they could both work, but they always took the time to express their love for one another.

Grey always came in with a smile on his face, even flirting with her a little. And she loved that about him.

She loved the conversation and the time and the small family they had created. She found she never missed her home back East.

This was her life now. She appreciated every moment of it.

Grey took her hand and led her around the counter. There, he pulled her into an embrace. "You'll be there when I get back?"

She smiled up at him. "I'm always there when you get back, Grey."

"I think it's because I ask every time."

"Are you worried?"

"I'm not worried, I just like to know that you make the promise every time. It makes me happy." He laughed.

"I swear, you say you don't know how to be romantic, but then, every time, you go and ask me if I'm going to be home."

"That's not romance."

"What is it, then?" Her joy was still overwhelming. She didn't want this feeling to ever end. Grey made her happier than she ever thought possible.

Little Ella climbed down from the chair and toddled over to them, tugging on Ava's skirts.

Grey scooped the child into his arms, dancing around with her a little. It was just a few steps, but those few steps were enough to bring even more joy to Ava's heart.

“What do you want, little one?”

The baby giggled and proceeded to steal the hat right off his head. She tried to put it on, but struggled because the brim made her open her arms far too wide.

The hat nearly fell onto the floor because of the motions she made, sliding down her back.

“Look at you, already growing up to be a proper cowpoke.”

Grey took the hat from Ella’s hands and placed it properly on her head. It dwarfed the child, falling down over her eyes.

This ended in laughter, all three of them nearly in tears as they shared one of a million beautiful moments that punctuated the lives of this family.

“You’re going to have to wear your spare hat on the road.”

“It’ll be worth it.” Grey nodded. “As long as she’s got the hat she wants.”

“You spoil that child.”

“I can’t help it, she reminds me of her mother.”

Ava blushed. “What would I ever do without you?”

“I don’t know.”

“I still can’t believe that this is my life.”

“You don’t miss your old life?”

“Not at all. That was so controlled. I didn’t have any choices. I couldn’t work. I wouldn’t have someone that I loved with me every night.

“It wouldn’t ever compare to this. That’s money. This is life as it should be.” Ava had said this a thousand times over the past few years.

Sometimes, they needed reassurance, and these words were what made both of them feel more comfortable. It had developed to the point that it wasn’t just a source of comfort anymore.

There was joy and celebration in those simple exchanges, a reminder of the reasons they had come together and the reasons they had stuck it out all those years in spite of the constant changes.

Grey picked Ava up. He loved to do that, one arm around her waist, lifting her up to kiss her. She couldn’t help but to giggle at the goofy-looking grin on his face.

The man was the best man she had ever seen, and he was the most important person in her life. She adored him.

The child cooed, grabbing at both of them and babbling the way that only two-year-olds can. There was something so loving there, the moment filled with the kinds of things that are only written about in stories.

Ava never knew this sort of thing was anything other than fiction before this point. But now, it was so real and undeniable.

She pulled back and away from Grey. “You’ll come back, right?”

“I’ll always come back to you.” He pulled her in for a longer hug and kiss this time.

Ava didn’t want him to pull away, but eventually they had to separate. It was heartbreaking to watch him leave, but it only made her heart grow fonder.

She looked around at the shop as Grey left her with the child.

This was the best life she could ever have.

Grey always had a smile for her. She loved her life. And her daughter only served to increase the bond between her and her husband.

It had taken some time to figure out how they were going to work it all out with both of them working, but Gus had worked with them and helped them make sure that their children would have the kind of life Ava wanted to give them.

He always worried about her, but she did the same for him. She worried about the love of her life. It simply came with the territory.

As they chatted through the next few minutes, doting on the child every few sentences, Ava only grew in love for her husband.

Eventually, he grinned. "I can't wait until we get a dozen of them."

Ava cocked an eyebrow. She knew what he was talking about, but she wanted to be sure that he really meant that and wasn't just joking around with her again.

"A dozen what?"

He winked at her. "Children."

Ava laughed. "I'm not sure I could handle being a mother of a dozen children."

"You would be an amazing mother of a dozen children, but if you don't want that, we can stop at six."

She guffawed in laughter. "We're still working on the second."

"Any good news about that?" Grey tilted his head. His eyes sparkled with delight as he teased her a little bit.

She loved the teasing. Grey did this sort of thing and from anyone else

she would find it awkward, but from Grey it came off as charming.

Perhaps it was because she trusted him to never push anything out of their lives that she didn't want and that he would be there to pick her up if she ever fell.

They danced around and he left her to tend the child and the shop. She wanted to do something for Grey, something that made him happy and showed her how much she cared about her.

Grey kept doing things for her, giving her every dream that he could think to give her, working hard to make her life work out the way that she wanted it to.

But he rarely asked for anything in return.

She had already started saving a little bit of money up in order to buy him a ranch of his own, but that was going to take a while. Business was starting to grow, but it wasn't as good as it needed to be to support a brand-new ranch.

Ella called out for her and she swept the toddler up into her arms. "What do you think we should do with Daddy?"

Her daughter pointed at some flowers. "Flower?"

She laughed. "I don't think that he would like flowers very much."

Ella frowned and cocked her head. It was the same expression Grey had when he was thinking about something.

Then, her face brightened and she stood up straighter, throwing a hand up in the air. "Pretty stuff?"

"Maybe some cologne? A scent?"

"Wood and cows."

Ava laughed. “Yes, I know he smells like wood and cows.”

She started to think, debating the fragrances that would be better for a man than a woman. It wouldn't be something flowery, but woodsy scents were often very popular among men who wanted to cover their natural body odor.

She frowned as she worked. It was going to take a while, but it would be worth it to see the look on his face. As she worked and cared for her child, she felt completely at peace, even bantering about possible names for her new concoction.

Eventually, she decided that it would just be called Grey and it would smell like a summer storm in a pine forest.

She just had to get the mixture right without Grey finding out.

She hummed, talking her way through it, but the distractions of having a child were always there. She welcomed her child's help, but it did mean that the project was going to take a lot longer than it needed to.

It was a simple, happy life, the kind of life that she had never imagined. She didn't miss her parents much, leaving them behind had been so simple and what she had gained had made it all worth it.

The trauma still came up occasionally, nightmares of Bart that she had to help Grey get over, but life had been improving in all the time that they spent together.

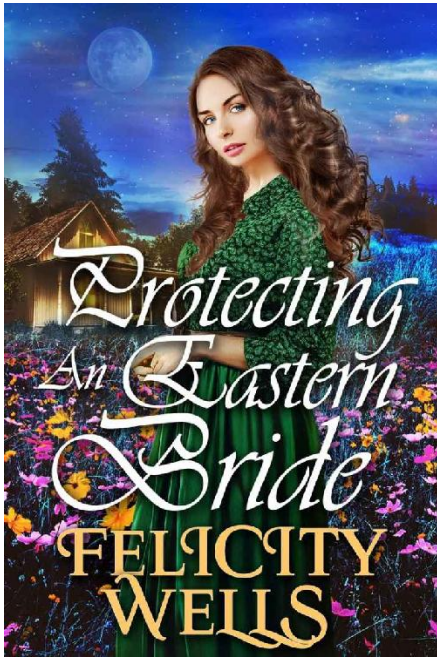
Life in the West was hard sometimes, but she still loved it.

This was something that had never been possible before she got on the train — and if she had never been thrown off that train, it would never have led to this love or this life.

And she wouldn't trade that for anything in the world.



## Protecting An Eastern Bride



## Chapter 1

“W ith hair like this, it’s no wonder I have no prospective suitors,” she grumbled to herself.

Eleanor sat before her looking glass brushing out her long, thick brown hair, trying in vain to tame the unruly locks. Frustrated, she set her brush down and ran her fingers through the curls.

In the mirror behind her, she saw Millie, the household maid, step into her room. Eleanor turned as Millie softly closed the door behind her.

“Millie, I simply cannot get my hair to cooperate,” Eleanor complained. “I never can. Do you know of anything I can do to get these curls out? If I can’t, I’m afraid I’ll be a spinster before long.”

Millie favored her with a smile. She had worked in the household since Eleanor was a young girl, and the way she saw it, Millie had done as much to raise her as her own mother had. Probably even more.

She was a stout woman a couple of inches taller than Eleanor’s lithe five-foot-five frame, with dark hair shot through with gray, but an unlined, ageless face.

Eleanor knew Millie to be an intelligent and clever woman who could be stern, but also incredibly nurturing. She was certainly more maternal than Eleanor’s mother.

“Now, why would you want to go gettin’ rid of these curls?” Millie asked her.

“They’re unmanageable,” Eleanor replied. “I can never get them to do what I want them to do.”

Millie laughed softly. “Sounds like a certain little girl I used to know.”

Eleanor laughed. “I was not that bad.”

“I suppose that depends on which side of the fence you was on,” she replied with a smile and a shrug.

“Now you’re just being silly,” Eleanor said.

“If you say so, Miss Eleanor.” Millie grinned as she rolled her eyes.

They shared a laugh together, then she looked into the mirror again and sighed at the mass of dark curls atop her head. Finally, she did what she always ended up doing, and selected one of her ribbons—red, today—and tied her hair back with it.

More than anything, Eleanor wished she had the sort of hair she could put up in some of the more fashionable and sometimes elaborate styles the ladies of Baltimore society tended to wear.

But she was resigned to the fact that her hair was so thick and curly, tying it back with a pretty ribbon was all she could do.

“Well, you might not think so, but your hair is beautiful, child,” Millie said. “You ought not be tryin’ to hide it away.”

“You sound like my mother,” Eleanor said with a frown.

“When it comes to things like that and bein’ a society woman, your mother’s wise. You might want to listen to her more.”

“I know she certainly thinks I should,” she replied with a small laugh.

“Speakin’ of your mother, she and your father want to see you down in the parlor,” Millie said.

“What? Now?”

Millie nodded. “Yes, child. Now,” she replied. “Now, go on with yourself. Best not keep them waiting.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes as she stood up. She walked over to the full-length looking glass in the corner and studied herself carefully, making sure everything was just so.

Her parents were sticklers about dressing appropriately and always looking your best. Their philosophy was that one should always dress as if one was expecting to receive company.

That was one bit of advice Eleanor always took to heart. She believed that being a lady of high social standing and position, as she was, required her to always be proper, and to observe all formalities and traditions.

After all, Eleanor knew she would one day be like her mother—married to a proper gentleman and in charge of a household. And that meant she had to keep everything just so, to ensure her house was held in high esteem by the rest of society.

And that was when the thought hit her. She turned to Millie, a wide smile on her face as she clasped her hands to her chest.

“Millie, have they found me a proper suitor? Is that what they want to see me about in the parlor?”

The older woman shook her head. “I don’t know, Miss Eleanor.”

“Have they chosen Joseph Welton?”

“I honestly don’t know, child.”

“Oh, please, Millie,” Eleanor begged. “Tell me. Is it Joseph?”

Millie laughed. “Child, I don’t know anythin’. There’s nothin’ for me to tell you,” she replied.

“But if you want to find out, I’d suggest you head on down to the parlor. I’m sure your folks would be happy to answer your questions.”

“Fine.”

Millie continued laughing as Eleanor twirled around and swished out of the room.

As she walked down the hallway, heading for the stairs, Eleanor’s mind swirled with a hundred different thoughts—most of them about the young and handsome Joseph Welton.

Eleanor smiled to herself as she thought about staring into his bottomless dark eyes and the flutter it always put into her heart.

She had flirted shamelessly with him at countless social gatherings, and wanted nothing more than for her parents to betroth her to him.

She knew there were several suitors vying for her hand. But she also knew her father had been working on a business deal with Joseph’s father, Archibald.

Uniting Eleanor and Joseph in matrimony would bring the two families even closer together, which would reap rewards for the stability and the continuity of their business collaborations.

It would only make sense for her parents to agree to a match between her and Joseph, and it was with those thoughts bouncing around in her head, making her feel lightheaded and giddy, that Eleanor descended the staircase.

She walked into the parlor to find her parents sitting in their chairs, side by side in front of the fire, neither of their faces betraying the

slightest hint of emotion.

She walked over and stood beside the hearth, listening to the crackle and pop of the logs as the fire consumed them. Her parents looked at her, both of them with the same inscrutable expression on their faces.

Finally, her father, Rutherford B. Hampton III, cleared his throat and leaned forward in his seat, his eyes fixed to Eleanor's.

"No sense in beating around the bush about things, I suppose," he said, his voice deep and booming.

"We have found you a match, Eleanor. A suitable and proper man that we are going to betroth you to."

Eleanor felt her stomach lurch, but a smile crawled across her face. She was practically bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, a white-hot fire of excitement coursing through her veins as she awaited the words she had longed to hear for what seemed like a lifetime already.

Her mother gave her a small smile, perhaps encouraging her to maintain her composure, like a properly dignified lady should always do.

"We have decided that you are to be betrothed to Archibald Welton," her father said.

Joy bloomed in her chest and, briefly, the smile on her face stretched from ear to ear. But then the words her father had spoken sunk in and her smile faded quickly.

The joy that had blossomed suddenly withered on the vine. Eleanor looked at her father, not sure that she'd heard him right. Perhaps he had misspoken and uttered the father's name, rather than the son's.

"Excuse me, Father?" she asked quietly. "I don't believe I heard you correctly."

Her father leaned his large, bulky frame back in his chair, and the wooden seat groaned beneath him.

For a long moment, the only sound in the parlor was the snapping of the logs that were aflame, and the air around her suddenly felt oppressively heavy.

“You heard me correctly, Eleanor,” he said gruffly. “You’re to be wed to Archibald Welton a week from today.”

“But, Father, he’s... he’s older than you,” she objected. “Surely you can’t mean for me to marry somebody near old enough to be my grandfather?”

“If we want to seal this business alliance, then I do mean for you to marry him. Archibald’s a decent man. He’ll treat you well,” her father said.

She had met the man on only a couple of occasions—social functions her parents had hosted. And in those times, she had learned that he was not a kind man.

He was brusque and abrasive. He seemed to care little about the thoughts, feelings, or opinions of women, and seemed to treat them as little more than vessels to use for his pleasure.

Eleanor very much doubted that he would treat her well.

“Father, I cannot marry this man—”

“You can, and you will,” he cut her off.

“Eleanor, dear, let’s not be dramatic about this. Archibald is a man of wisdom and wealth. He will provide a good home for you.

“He will provide you with position and esteem,” her mother added in that soothing tone that never failed to grate on Eleanor’s nerves.

“And your marriage will provide for the stability and wealth of this family,” her father noted.

His words cut right to the point of it all, and Eleanor was suddenly realizing it. When she was younger, her mother had often spoken to her of her duty as a daughter to help provide for and secure the family’s future and legacy.

Eleanor had pretended to understand it back then, but it was only now that the words struck home. It was only now that she realized what it was her mother had meant.

By securing the family’s future and legacy, it meant adding to their already considerable wealth with whatever Archibald Welton was offering for her hand in marriage.

For her father, this was merely one more business transaction, just one more way to add worth and wealth to his business ventures.

And, recalling her mother’s words, Eleanor realized her duty to the family was to enter into a marriage that would do those very things.

Eleanor wanted to marry for love. She wanted to be devoted to somebody and have their devotion in return. She wanted to wake up every day and smile and laugh.

She wanted to be so in love, she could not bear to be apart from her husband. She’d dreamed of having a husband who would fall all over himself to make her happy and prove his love to her, just as she would do whatever it took to prove her love to him.

To Eleanor, marriage wasn’t supposed to be about securing the family legacy. It was supposed to be about love. Period.

“I want my marriage to mean more than that, Father. I want to be in love with—”

“You’ve always had such romantic notions in your head, dear,” her



mother interrupted. "But those notions are fit for a child, not for a grown woman. It is time to grow up and do your duty for your family."

"Mother, I—"

"Enough!" her father roared, standing up so suddenly, he nearly knocked the chair over.

Eleanor shrank back, pressing herself against the wall, wilting before his fury. Her father had a terrible temper and it terrified her. It was one reason Eleanor usually never pushed him very hard about most anything.

It helped, of course, that most of the time, her parents never seemed to take much notice of or interest in her. It kept her out of their eye, and therefore, well away from their wrath.

But this was different. This was her future, her life, they were talking about. And Eleanor believed with everything in her that she should have some say in it.

She certainly didn't believe she should be auctioned off like a piece of livestock, or sold to a man simply for the sake of fostering a business alliance.

Her father stared at her, his eyes blazing with anger. "You will do as we tell you," he sneered. "You will marry Archibald, and you will be a good wife to him.

"That is your duty to this family, and by God, you will do it. Am I understood?"

Eleanor said nothing, her gaze falling to the floor beneath her feet. She felt her eyes stinging as they welled with tears, but she fought to keep them from falling, fearing the sight of them would only further inflame her father's ire.

“I said, am I understood?” he hissed, his voice low and menacing.

Eleanor nodded quickly, an almost automatic reaction she had developed to him whenever he was angry.

“Yes, Father,” she replied, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“Good. Then I suggest you start learning how to be gracious,” he growled. “Archibald wants to meet you and formally acknowledge the betrothal tomorrow.”

Without waiting for her to reply, her father stormed out of the room with her mother right on his heels, leaving Eleanor standing alone in the parlor.

Finally, she let the tears fall and gave herself a moment to indulge in them. Her heart thundered in her chest as her stomach folded over on itself.

It was all she could do to keep her legs from giving out under her.

She wiped away the tears and smoothed down her hair as she tried to calm her nerves.

Folding her arms over her chest, Eleanor paced the room, trying to find some way around this—some way to foil her father’s plans and stop this marriage before he could foist her off on a man old enough to be her grandfather.

As she passed by the table, she noticed the newspaper laid out on top of it. The page showed advertisements from men looking for brides.

She stopped to read a few of them, and an idea started to form in her mind.

Eleanor cut a glance at the doorway. She could hear her father speaking loudly, his anger clear, somewhere deeper in the house.

Grabbing a piece of paper and a fountain pen from the desk, she started to scratch out a letter in response to one of the advertisements that had caught her eye.

As she read over what she'd written, Eleanor frowned. She crumpled the piece of paper, dissatisfied with her words, and tossed it into the hearth, watching for a moment as the flames consumed it.

Her mind still spinning, Eleanor grabbed the newspaper and quickly folded it. She tucked it under her arm as she dashed out of the room, a bold, maybe even insane plan forming in her mind.

## Chapter 2

“**E**asy, easy,” Sam said.

Luke looked up at him, a frown on his face. “She’s just an old cow.”

Sam walked over to where his ranch hand, Luke, was tending to a wound on the cow’s leg, and stroked the big cow’s neck affectionately. He looked down at Luke, a small frown tugging the corners of his mouth downward.

Luke was a good man who worked hard. He and Sam’s other ranch hand, Zebulin, had worked for Sam for a few years now and had been invaluable in helping get this ranch on its feet. But they often didn’t see things the way he did.

“She’s a livin’ thing, same as us. And she helps in providing for us,” Sam said. “She deserves to be cared for and respected the way we would if we were hurt.”

Luke chuckled to himself. “You’re the only man I’ve ever known who cares for his livestock the way you do.”

A smile flickered across his lips. He knew he did things differently and that some people thought him odd because of it. But he never put much stock in what other people thought of him.

Sam knelt down and took the cow’s forearm from Luke, speaking softly to her. He took a look at the gash, relieved that it wasn’t any worse, but he imagined it was causing the cow some discomfort.

He gently set the leg back down, then rooted around in his bag. He came out with a jar of salve that would ease the pain and help prevent infection.

As Luke watched, Sam gently spread the salve over the wound, making sure to pack it into the cut. After that, he wrapped a clean bandage around the leg to keep the dirt out, lessening the chances of the cow taking an infection.

That done, he stood up and wiped his hands on a rag and turned to Luke. "Grab Zebulin and move the herd down to the south field to graze."

"You got it."

Luke walked off as Sam led the injured cow into the barn and locked her in a stall to recuperate. After feeding and watering her, Sam pulled his hat a bit lower and walked out of the barn.

In the distance, he could see Luke and Zeb on horseback, driving the cattle toward the south field like he'd asked.

He cast a glance over at his house, looking at the framework for the new room he was building. His house had started as a small one-room cabin he'd purchased on his own after his father had passed on.

Since then, he'd been adding more rooms to the original structure, making it larger. For what, he had no idea.

He had no wife and no children, so Sam wasn't sure why he needed all of the rooms and that much space in his home.

Maybe, one day, he'd be able to fill it with a family. But for now, it kept his mind and hands busy, which was something he needed.

Left to his own devices, Sam knew his mind would go places he had no interest in thinking about. Namely, his father and his childhood.

To say it had been rough would have been an understatement. It had been terrible, in point of fact.

But then, Sam figured he wasn't unique in that regard, and dwelling on it was pointless since it wouldn't change anything. All he could do was move forward and leave the past where it belonged.

So, after his father had passed, he'd sold the land and the ranch he'd grown up working, and moved from Kansas to the fertile, open land of the Wyoming territory.

It was a beautiful land and he'd fallen in love with it almost as soon as he'd gotten there. But they were making a big push for statehood and Sam wasn't sure how crazy he was about that.

There was something about living in a land free of all the regulations and rules a governmental body imposed upon people that appealed to him.

The idea of a life lived by the sweat of his brow and the muscles in his back, making it on his own, without interference, suited him right down to his boots.

He pushed those thoughts from his mind, preferring not to waste time or energy thinking about things he couldn't control, and looked at his house.

At some point, Sam knew he was going to have to do something to make the disparate pieces match. The original cabin looked markedly different from what he'd built, almost like he'd taken two houses and mashed them together.

It wasn't necessarily pretty, not like some of the big ranch houses he'd seen, but it was clean and well kept.

Unlike some other unmarried men he knew, Sam refused to live in filth. Keeping his home clean and well ordered was something of a point of pride with him.

Sam walked into the house and grabbed an apple from the larder. The click-clack of nails on the wood floor behind him brought a smile to his face.

He turned to find the tan and white mutt that had adopted him shortly after he'd moved into the original cabin what felt like ages ago. He was a big, strong dog with short hair, floppy ears, and inquisitive eyes.

Sam had taken him in when he'd shown up scrawny and half-starved, feeding and nursing him back to health.

He'd expected the big dog to take off when he was back on his feet, but he'd stuck around, showing a fierce loyalty that Sam appreciated. He'd named him Biscuit and they were inseparable.

"Finally decided to wake up, huh?"

Biscuit sat down and turned his warm brown eyes on Sam, making him chuckle. The dog might not be able to speak, but Sam always knew what he was saying anyway.

He grabbed a chunk of the roasted chicken he had in the cold room and tossed it to Biscuit, who snatched it out of mid-air and happily chomped away.

Laughing softly, Sam took a bite of his apple as he walked past the dog, giving him a scratch behind the ears before heading back outside.

Biscuit was there beside him, licking his lips and looking up at Sam gratefully as they walked the perimeter of the yard. He checked the windbreak fencing that fronted his property.

His gaze drifted up to the sign that hung above the gates: "Double R Ranch." His mind immediately traveled back in time, dredging up the memory of his brother, Reeve, and sending a familiar lance of pain through his heart.

Reeve had died when they were both boys, died protecting Sam. It

was a fact that never failed to cause him pain.

Wanting to honor his brother, Sam had named his ranch after his brother—the Double R stood for Reeve Ridgefield. It was a small, inadequate gesture, but it was the only thing Sam could do.

With their father dead, it wasn't as if Sam could avenge his brother's death. And he certainly wouldn't let himself forget Reeve, or the sacrifice he made.

Naming his ranch after his brother seemed to be the only thing he could do to keep Reeve's memory alive.

Biscuit leaned his big body against Sam's leg, a low growl issuing from his throat. Sam dropped his hand and stroked the dog's neck.

"Easy, boy," he said softly. A moment later, Sam heard the sound of the horse cantering down the road, coming toward his gates.

The road was lined with trees on either side. That screen of trees and brush prevented Samuel from seeing who was approaching until they came to a bend in the road about twenty yards from the gates.

He'd considered cutting down some of those trees many times before, but hadn't ever gotten around to it.

With so many different Indian tribes in the area, not knowing who was coming down the road could be fatal. On the other hand, though, Sam had never had any sort of difficulty with the tribes.

In fact, he'd had a handful of relatively smooth interactions with them and thought their reputation as bloodthirsty savages might have been a bit overblown.

He didn't have to worry, as Wyatt Smith emerged from the trees, riding casually along while singing to himself. Wyatt had a ranch of his own up the road apiece, and was one of the first people Sam had met when he first moved to Prodigal River.



They'd become thicker than thieves from the start. They were similar in temperament and both had a dry sense of humor. Sam and Wyatt were very no-nonsense sorts who'd spent their lives working the land, and shared a similar work ethic.

Wyatt rode into the yard, heading over toward the barn with Sam and Biscuit following behind him. Sam crunched on his apple while Wyatt dismounted.

Biscuit wagged his tail and barked playfully at the visitor. Laughing, Wyatt squatted down, earning wet, sloppy licks to the face.

"All right, all right," Wyatt said as he scratched Biscuit behind the ears.

He stood up and fished a piece of beef jerky out of a pouch on his belt and fed it to Biscuit, who chewed on it happily. Wyatt looked at Sam with a mischievous smirk on his face.

"How ya doin' today?" he asked.

"Doin' fine," Sam replied. "Yourself?"

He nodded and took off his Stetson, wiping his brow with his sleeve before putting the hat back onto his head.

"Good, good," he replied. "Mighty hot today, though."

Sam grinned at him. "Uh huh. Out with it."

"Out with what?" Wyatt replied with an expression of feigned innocence.

"With whatever's got you grinnin' like a fool right now."

"Oh, was I grinnin' like a fool? I was not aware that I was."

"Well, now you are," Sam responded with a chuckle. "So let's hear it."

Wyatt looked off across the sea of green grass and out toward the distant scrubby and craggy mountain peaks.

Halfway between Sam's land and the mountains, the sun glittered upon the surface of the mighty Prodigal River as it cut through the earth in a wide, snaking path like a jagged scar.

The river was responsible not just for the town's name, but served as an important watering hole for those cattle drives heading south toward the ranches down in Colorado.

Sam was fortunate that he'd gotten a plot of land near enough to the river that his own cattle could take water when they felt the need. Not that it wasn't without some difficulty when the Prodigal overflowed its banks.

It had only happened a few times since he'd been there but, not wanting his cattle to be washed away, Sam was ever-vigilant about it.

"I could do with a drink, I think. Somethin' to wash this road dust out of my mouth," Wyatt said.

"You're really goin' to drag this out, ain't ya?"

Wyatt shrugged. "A little liquid refreshment might help grease the rails, as they like to say."

"Yeah, 'they' say a lot. I never liked 'them' all that much," Sam replied. "Come on, then, let's go grease your rails."

After setting Wyatt's horse to feed and water, they walked into the house. Biscuit was on their heels, begging for another piece of jerky with his eyes.

Wyatt chuckled and ruffled the big dog's fur before tossing him a large chunk of the dried meat. Biscuit snapped it out of the air, then went and curled up on the blanket near the hearth, munching away contentedly.

“You know, you take care of that big mutt better than some people take care of their own kids,” Wyatt noted.

“I like that big mutt better than other people’s kids.”

Wyatt laughed as Sam grabbed a pair of cups and the pitcher of lemonade from the cold room, then carried it back out to the table.

Wyatt was leaning back in his chair with his feet perched on the edge of the table, so Sam slapped them off, sending Wyatt lurching forward in his seat.

“Table’s for eatin’. Not for your dirty boots,” he said with a grin.

“I sometimes forget you’re a little fussy like that.”

“You call it fussy, I call it sanitary.”

Sam poured them both a cup of lemonade, then sat down across from Wyatt, who was already taking a long swallow of his.

Wyatt was about as opposite from Sam as they could be. Sam had a lean, trim build that was taut with corded muscle. He had dark blonde hair and blue eyes.

He kept his hair trimmed and his face free of stubble, often leading Wyatt to joke about his baby face.

Wyatt, on the other hand, was a few inches shorter than Sam, and was wide through the shoulders and chest. He was a strong man, with arms thicker than the thighs of most people, hair as dark as a raven’s wing and eyes darker than that.

His face was always well stubbled, but he somehow never managed to grow a full mustache and beard.

About the only thing they had in common was that they were both rugged men with skin that was tawny after being out in the sun as

often as they were.

For all of their exterior differences, and how opposite they were in many different ways, their friendship was deep and true. They held each other in tremendous esteem and had great respect for one another.

In some ways, Wyatt reminded Sam of his brother, Reeve.

“That is delicious lemonade,” Wyatt commented. “You really will make somebody a fine wife one day.”

Sam chuckled. “Glad you approve. Now, out with it.”

“All right, all right. Well, I was down in town today and ran into Mr. Sutter,” he started.

The actual town proper of Prodigal River was almost half an hour’s ride south of Sam’s ranch. He didn’t go into town often, usually only when he had to.

He liked to keep a running list of things he needed, then, on the first of the month, he’d go into town and stock up for the next few weeks. As far as Sam knew, most people who ran ranches on the outskirts of town did the same.

“Anyway, Mr. Sutter had a telegram he was fixin’ to ride out and deliver to you,” Wyatt went on. “And I figured that since I was already headed this way, I’d deliver it for him.”

Sam frowned, a slow, uneasy feeling roiling in his belly. He had no family left and no idea who would be sending him a telegram, but had no trouble believing it was a portent of bad tidings.

In his experience, good news seldom traveled via telegram.

“And? Did you read it?” Sam asked.

“What? Mr. Sutter entrusted me with this important assignment on the one condition that I did not read the telegram and your personal business,” Wyatt said, putting on that expression of feigned innocence again.

“So, you read it.”

“Of course, I read it.” Wyatt grinned. “And I want to know who this Nora Rawlings is. Not only that, I want to know why you haven’t seen fit to mention her before now.”

Sam cocked his head, confusion gripping him tightly. “I have no idea what you’re talkin’ about, Wyatt.”

With a flourish that would make a showman proud, Wyatt produced the telegram from an inside pocket of his vest and slid it across the table.

Sam picked it up and read the strip of paper:

*Your wife is on her way Stop Will arrive in Cheyenne, two day’s time Stop Would appreciate your welcome Stop Nora Rawlings Stop*

Sam read it several more times before the realization of what it all meant came crashing down on him. He looked up at Wyatt, who seemed genuinely puzzled, but amused by it all.

Sam buried his face in his hands for a moment, trying to gather himself. He finally looked up at his old friend.

“You do know what this is, don’t you?” he asked.

“Sounds like you’ve got a woman who thinks she’s your wife comin’ on out here to see you. That is goin’ to be somethin’ funny to see.”

“This is your fault.”

Wyatt laughed. “How is this my fault?”

“Because the last time we were in town and had a few, you talked me into fillin’ out that mail-order bride advertisement,” Sam said, feeling mortified.

As if the memory had just come back to him, Wyatt roared with laughter, doubling over and slapping his knee like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. Sam sat back, not feeling the slightest bit amused.

It had been a lark, something that seemed funny and like a good idea after a few too many drinks down at the Tambernay Saloon some weeks back.

“What am I goin’ to do, Wyatt?” Sam asked, feeling his panic rising. “I never intended for that advertisement to be answered.”

“Well, I’d suggest buyin’ a bigger lock and maybe buildin’ that fence out there a little bit higher.” Wyatt laughed.

“That ain’t funny, Wyatt.”

“What? I mean, you put that advertisement in. Surely, you knew this could happen at some point.”

“I didn’t, actually. But, at the very least, I would’ve expected that we’d correspond for a bit. Write a few letters back and forth?” Sam gasped, exasperated.

“I never expected to get a telegram tellin’ me she was just showin’ up!”

“That... that’s a might unpredictable, I’ll give you that,” Wyatt agreed with a chuckle.

“I’m bein’ serious, Wyatt. What am I goin’ to do?”

Wyatt shrugged his broad shoulders. “I guess you’re goin’ to need to get ready to receive company. Ready to receive a wife, I should say.”

Wyatt made light of it, but this was like a bomb going off in the middle of Sam's life. He hadn't expected this, didn't even want it.

As Wyatt continued to chuckle, Sam stood up and paced the room, trying to figure out what he was going to do.

At the same time, he was silently kicking himself for letting Wyatt talk him into it in the first place. What had he been thinking?

"Sam."

He stopped pacing and turned to look at Wyatt, his mind racing. "What?"

"It's goin' to be all right. Worst-case scenario is that you two don't get on and she goes back to wherever she came from, and you go on like before," he said.

"But best-case scenario is that you find somethin' you told me you wanted that night we put the advertisement in."

"And what was that? What did I tell you I wanted?" Sam asked, struggling to recall his words.

"Love," Wyatt said simply. "Somebody to love who'd love you back. Why do you think we put that advertisement in the paper in the first place?"

Sam opened his mouth to speak but closed it again, unsure how to reply. The truth was, he had no idea what he'd said.

What Wyatt had just said sounded like something Sam might say, but he didn't remember saying it. The reality, though, was that it didn't matter.

This Nora Rawlings woman was on her way to his place as he stood there trying to get his head on straight about it.

As he looked around the great room of his home, he grimaced. It was clean and tidy, well organized, and well kept. But it was sparse and not very homey.

It was rough and, he thought, definitely not a place for a woman. But, like it or not—ready or not—a woman was coming, with every intention of making this place her home.

And Sam had never before been more terrified of anything in all his life.

If you enjoyed the story so far, you can read the rest [here](#).



## A Thank You To My Reader

**D**ear Reader,

First of all, I would like to thank you for taking some of your precious time to read my book.

It is such an honor to be able to share my stories with you.

As quality is my primary goal, it gives me a great feeling of security and pleasure to know that you finished this book.

Thank You again for making this possible for me!

With Gratitude,

Felicity.